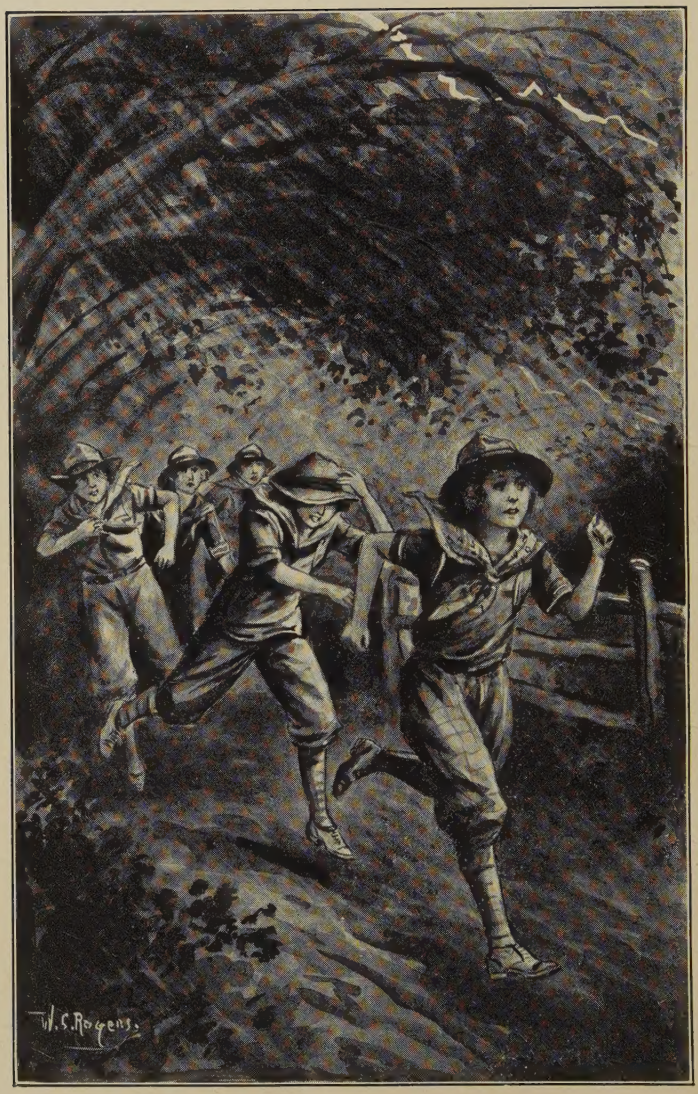
THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON A HIKE

LAURA LEE HOPE



A CLAP OF THUNDER SENT THEM SCURRYING ALONG THE ROAD.

The Outdoor Girls on a Hike

or

The Mystery of the Deserted Airplane

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

Author of "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale," "The Outdoor Girls at New Moon Ranch," "The Blythe Girls: Helen Margy and Rose," "The Bobbsey Twins," Etc.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON A HIKE

CHAPTER I

HIKE AHEAD

"HAND me that book, Carolyn, will you? There's a dear!"

Carolyn Cooper, blond and pretty and delightfully lazy, regarded the speaker reproachfully.

"Always, just when I am comfortable, you think up something for me to do, Lota Bronson. Here—take your old book!"

"Thanks for the manner," laughed Lota, catching the book as it was flung toward her. "If you ask for the truth, Carolyn——"

"Which I don't and never did," sighed Carolyn.

"*I'd* say you were getting abominably lazy."

"Speak for yourself," retorted Carolyn.

"I don't see you dancing any Highland fling yourself!"

"It's the weather," said Irene Moore, wrinkling her funny little nose. "We've all got spring fever."

Stella Sibley sat up with sudden energy.

"How convenient it is to blame the weather," she said. "But I'll tell you what's the matter with us, girls. It isn't spring fever. It's just plain laziness, spelled with a large L."

"It's a plot," protested Carolyn, from the mass of pillows in the porch swing. "She's trying to stir up something, girls. Don't let her!"

But Stella found support from an unexpected quarter.

"I think Stella is exactly right." This from Meg, the second of the Bronson twins. "We are all getting soft, sitting around eating candy and going to dances——"

"We play tennis sometimes!" Irene protested.

"How often?" Meg sniffed. "Once or twice a week. And I noticed after that last singles set I beat you——"

"Ouch! Don't remind me!" begged Irene. "The memory hurts!"

"You were puffing like a fat little——"

"Don't say it!" begged Irene. "Not if my friendship means anything to you!"

"Just the same," Stella Sibley took up the theme where she had left off, "the fact remains that as athletic girls and members of the Outdoor Girls Club, we haven't been exactly living up to our reputation."

"Well, what do you want us to do?" Carolyn definitely abandoned her pillows and regarded Stella with the air of one who is willing to be reasoned with. "Are we to start skipping rope or making passes at a punching bag?"

"Not so bad for exercise," chuckled Stella. "But hardly what I had in mind. I was thinking that what we needed was more road work."

"Girls," giggled Irene, "she wants to make us into lady pugilists."

"Oh, well," said Stella, offended, "if all you can do is laugh——"

"*I'm* not laughing," said Carolyn Cooper virtuously. "I think it's a mighty fine idea."

"Listen who's talking!" mocked Irene.

"But I really am in earnest," protested Carolyn. "Hiking is the best kind of exer-

cise and it's apt to prove mighty interesting, too."

"The trouble is that you can't go far enough in one day to have any real fun," Lota Bronson objected. "By the time you reach new, interesting places you have to turn round and trot home again. Not so good."

"Oh, but I've an idea!" Irene clapped her hands. "A perfectly scrumbumptious idea! Why not take a real hike—an overnight hike?"

"A several overnights hike," amplified Carolyn, slightly incoherent in her sudden enthusiasm. "Then we shouldn't have to turn around and come home just when things began to get interesting."

"And we could camp overnight wherever we happened to be," added Irene. "We could pick out a route that wouldn't be too lonely and where there would be plenty of farmhouses that would take us in for the night."

Stella considered the idea seriously.

"That would be fun, girls, real fun. We would be gypsies for a while. What a lark to start out in the morning without knowing where we would end up at night."

"Or how!" finished Meg, with a chuckle. "I'm right with you, girls, although Lota and I are more used to traveling on horses' feet than our own. We ought to be good, though, for a considerable cross-country hike."

The Outdoor Girls were holding their meeting at the beautiful Deepdale home of Stella Sibley. They had chosen the summerhouse in the garden because it was the coolest spot anywhere about. The summerhouse was completely and comfortably furnished with its swing, its small tables and inviting chairs, and the girls were fond of holding their meetings there.

"I think it's a marvelous idea," agreed Lota, continuing the discussion of the proposed hike. "Only I don't think we ought to leave too much to chance. We ought to agree to hike so many miles a day for a certain number of days."

"We could make it a two-weeks' hike," Stella suggested, "and we could cover, well, say something like ten miles a day."

"Lovely!" cried Carolyn. "Fourteen days at ten miles a day makes something like one hundred and forty miles in the two weeks. Not bad for girls who have grown 'soft'!" She made a face at Stella.

"We haven't done it yet," Stella quickly reminded her.

"I have another idea," Irene announced suddenly.

"She's running mad with them to-day," observed Lota, with a lazy grin.

"Why wouldn't it be possible to visit the married girls while we're about it?"

"Great!" exclaimed Stella approvingly. "Mollie and Roy have that darling bungalow in the woods——"

"Newlyweds!" chuckled Irene Moore. "Maybe they wouldn't be glad to see us."

"Maybe they wouldn't!" scoffed Stella. "I'd be willing to take a chance on that."

"Then we could go on to the seashore and stay overnight with Grace and Amy and the boys," Carolyn proposed. "And then travel on to Betty's."

"Up in the hills," agreed Irene contentedly. "I call that a pretty nice itinerary, if you ask me."

"Then it's settled?" asked Stella, in her capacity of president. "There is no dissenting voice?"

"Not one dissenting voice!" the others assured her in a solemn chorus.

"Then," added Stella, assuming a very

businesslike manner, "I think it's about time we called the meeting to order and got on with the business of electing officers. That's what we are here for, you know."

"Oh, bother business," protested Carolyn Cooper. "I move we save time by reëlecting the same officers we had last year. I'm sure we all want Stella to go on being president——"

"Hear! Hear!" cried Irene, the irrepressible. "Second the motion!"

"Carried unanimously," added Meg Bronson, grinning.

"And I'm sure," Carolyn continued, looking prettier than ever as she twinkled at them mischievously, "Irene has made a most excellent, honest, and praiseworthy treasurer——"

"Irene for treasurer!" was the clamorous cry, while Stella rapped in vain for order. "We'll have no one else! We want Irene!"

"Unanimously elected!" laughed Carolyn. "For myself," she lowered her eyes modestly, "I say nothing. As your secretary, I have honestly tried to give satisfaction. It is for you to decide whether or not I have succeeded."

"We want Carolyn!" the others chorused

obligingly. "We want Carolyn! Carolyn Cooper for secretary!"

Carolyn rose and bowed gravely about the circle.

"I thank you all," she said.

"Well, I must say," cried Stella indignantly, "I never saw such an unbusinesslike meeting in my life! What I want to know is, am I the president of this——"

"Didn't you just hear yourself elected?" asked Carolyn, with much gravity.

"You must have been asleep or something," giggled Irene.

"Well, of all the unbusinesslike——"

"Oh, bother!" drawled Meg. "Who wants to be businesslike on a day like this? Listen!" she added, sitting at attention. "Do you hear an airplane or am I imagining things?"

Silence descended on the summerhouse; a silence invaded by the unmistakable roar of an approaching plane.

"Oh!" Carolyn jumped to her feet and ran out into the open. "Maybe it's Hal. Oh, I hope it is!"

The rest of the girls joined Carolyn and gazed up at the plane, now directly overhead.

"What do you mean by 'maybe it's Hal'?"

Lota Bronson demanded. "Don't tell me Hal has taken up flying!"

"Oh, hadn't you heard?" Carolyn tried to look innocent. "Hal has gone crazy over aviation. He has been up in a plane several times and he told me that he is considering taking up flying—seriously, you know."

"You little wretch!" cried Lota. "Of course you wouldn't tell us about it!"

Hal Duckworth was a nice lad, who had become interested in the Outdoor Girls—in general; and in Carolyn Cooper—in particular. It would not be giving away a secret to admit that Carolyn returned this interest.

"I think it's thrilling," observed Irene. "If Hal gets to be a demon air pilot, maybe he'll take us for a ride once in a while."

The plane winged its swift way into the distance, the whine of its motor died on the soft summer air.

As the girls turned to reënter the summer-house they saw that some one had come into the garden. An unprepossessing old crone, dressed in the colorful garb of a gypsy, shuffled along the gravel drive. Two younger women with dark, brooding faces, followed her.

They saw the girls standing at the en-

trance to the summerhouse and came toward them. The old crone's face lighted with what was evidently intended to be an ingratiating smile.

"Have your fortunes told, pretty ladies?" she mouthed, showing toothless gums. "Pretty fortunes for pretty ladies. Come, cross my palm with silver and you shall look into the future."

"Send them away!" Carolyn whispered to Stella. "I don't like the looks of them. Do send them away!"

CHAPTER II

A GYPSY NAMED HULAH

STELLA SIBLEY did not like the looks of the gypsies any more than Carolyn Cooper did. There was something in the old crone's smile, in the sullen faces of the other two that repelled her. She knew, however, that kind words are often more effective than threats. So she said, answering the gypsy's smile:

"We don't care to have our fortunes read just now. We are busy with something else."

The eyes of the old crone roved to the summerhouse, luxuriously appointed and with every evidence of recent occupation. She leered at Stella, again displaying toothless gums.

"We can wait," she said, "until you are finished with your—business."

Stella glanced swiftly at the other girls. She could see that they were all half-dis-

mayed, half-angered by the gypsy's presumption.

"No," said Stella, with a decided shake of the head. "We thank you very much, but we shan't want our fortunes read to-day. You would only be wasting your time by staying here."

Instead of retreating, the gypsy shuffled closer.

"To a gypsy time is nothing, pretty lady," she persisted. "We will wait."

"No; you will go," said Stella quietly. "I've told you we don't want our fortunes read and I mean it. If you do not go at once, I shall have to call some one from the house."

This threat appeared to have no effect upon the old crone. She stretched out her skinny old hand toward Stella.

"The pretty lady would not do that," she whined. "She has too kind a heart. I am an old, old woman, but I can see into the future —aye, better than most. Give me your hand, dearie, and I will tell your fortune."

Stella shrank back, her hands outflung in a gesture of unconscious loathing.

"Go away!" she cried. "Go away!"

While Stella Sibley is wondering how she

can drive the impertinent gypsies from the garden, it may be well to take a moment to introduce the Outdoor Girls to those who are not already acquainted with them.

The adventures of the Outdoor Girls had been interesting and varied from that first, never-to-be-forgotten camping and tramping trip, the details of which have been set forth in the book entitled, "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale." There had been later adventures in Florida, at Wild Rose Lodge, at Cape Cod and other interesting places. A summer spent at Spring Hill Farm carried with it adventures that would long live in the memory of the girls.

In the volume immediately preceding this present story and entitled "The Outdoor Girls at New Moon Ranch," the girls had spent a thrilling vacation as the guests of Daniel Tower on the latter's Western ranch. Daniel Tower was the guardian and self-styled uncle of Meg and Lota Bronson, recent members of the Outdoor Girls Club.

Of the four original Outdoor Girls, Betty Nelson, Mollie Billette, Grace Ford and Amy Blackford, there was now none left in the club, they having all deserted it in favor of marriage.

One by one, during the years, they had dropped out. First, Betty Nelson, the much-loved Little Captain, had married Allen Washburn, a young Deepdale lawyer. Then Amy Blackford had married Will Ford, Grace's brother. Still later Grace had paired off with Frank Haley, another Deepdale boy.

But as the older girls had dropped out, new members were initiated; first Irene Moore and Stella Sibley, then Carolyn Cooper and the Bronson twins. So when Mollie Billette finally decided to take the "big step" and had married Roy Anderson, long her fervent admirer, there were still five Outdoor Girls, though none of the original number remained in the club.

Naturally, as new Outdoor Girls took the place of old, new boys were admitted to the magic circle.

First there was Clem Field, a cousin of Stella Sibley. Clem was a likable lad and from the first had been attracted to the Outdoor Girls and to all that their club stood for. He had liked Mollie Billette particularly well, and for a time their close friends had found themselves unable to predict whether Roy or Clem would be the lucky one chosen by dark-eyed, dark-haired, vivacious Mollie.

Since Mollie had definitely turned to Roy Anderson, however, Clem had seemed to find it possible to transfer his admiration to Irene Moore.

Then there was Hal Duckworth, a fine lad who made no secret of his admiration for Carolyn Cooper.

Dick Blossom, a young giant of a fellow, with great hands that seemed continually to get in his way, was another good friend of the Outdoor Girls. During the previous summer he had appeared greatly taken with both the Bronson twins and had created great merriment for the rest of the young folks by his inability to tell them apart.

Deepdale, where the Outdoor Girls lived, was a thriving city of some twenty thousand inhabitants and was situated on the banks of the Argono River. This river emptied into Rainbow Lake, some miles below.

Now to return once more to the Outdoor Girls as they face the impertinent gypsies in the Sibley garden.

The aspect of the three gypsies had grown threatening. The leer had faded from the lips of the ancient crone. She mouthed wrathfully, muttering something beneath her breath.

One of the younger women said angrily:

"Make them do as you say, Hulah, or call down the curse of the tribe upon them!"

The woman called Hulah raised a skinny arm above her head. Her sunken eyes fixed themselves upon Stella with a disconcerting intensity.

"For the last time," she shrilled. "Will you let us read your fortune?"

"No!" cried Stella, frightened but thoroughly angry. "Go away, you horrible old woman!"

The old crone raised both arms above her head. The expression of vindictive hate on her withered old face was horrible to see.

"Then," she cried, in a shrill, piercing voice, "may the curse of——"

"Dick!" shouted Meg suddenly, in a round full young voice that drowned out the shriek of the gypsy. "Dick Blossom! Come here! Quick!"

A stalwart young fellow had been passing along the side street. Meg had seen his head and shoulders above the hedge that guarded the Sibley property.

Her shouted command was received and obeyed instantly.

Dick vaulted the hedge lightly, for all his

bulk, and loped across the lawn with the grace of a young elephant. He stopped beside the girls and regarded the queer scene with a look of bewilderment.

"For the love of Pete—" he began, but paused as the gypsies, after one good look at his height and breadth of shoulder and the ham that served him as a fist, turned and scuttled down the pathway, the old crone muttering and mouthing savagely at those in the summerhouse.

"Well," said Dick whimsically, "I may be dumb; but tell me, somebody, what it is all about."

"Oh, those horrible gypsies!" cried Stella, clinging to Dick's arm. "They wanted to read our fortunes, Dick, and when we wouldn't let them they got nasty and threatened to put a c-curse upon us."

"Nervy beggars!" cried Dick. "Wish I'd known that a few seconds earlier. I wouldn't have let 'em get off so easily."

"All we wanted them to do was to get off," Stella explained, with a nervous giggle. "And they wouldn't. Oh, Dick, I'm glad you came!"

Dick grinned.

"For once I'm really welcome," he said.

"Think I'll stroll down to the gate, ladies, and see if those gypsies have really taken themselves off."

He returned a few moments later to report that the gypsy women were mere specks in the distance.

He was all for going on about his business then, but the girls would not part with him so easily. Quite apart from their genuine liking for the young fellow, they found his stalwart presence extremely reassuring and comforting at that time. The evil influence of the gypsies still seemed to hover above the garden.

Carolyn linked her arm within Stella's as the Bronson twins and Irene dragged Dick into the summerhouse.

"That horrible old crone!" she said, with a shudder. "I may be silly, Stella, but I'm glad she didn't have time to finish that curse!"

CHAPTER III

ROBBERS

Dick Blossom was told about the Outdoor Girls' proposed hike and listened with flattering attention.

"Bully!" he said, and added, with a grin: "Nothing better for reducing, I've been told."

Lota and Irene made a dash for him and he ducked adroitly from the summerhouse.

"I was going, anyway," and he grinned as he avoided their laughing attack. "Don't hurry me! It isn't polite!"

As he dodged among the bushes, Stella called after him:

"Come on over to-night, Dick. I think Hal and Clem will be here."

Dick paused and glanced back.

"Will you treat me right?" he demanded.

"We'll pet and pamper you to your heart's content," Stella promised recklessly. "Only come."

Dick nodded.

"Try to keep me away," he retorted, and vaulted over the hedge.

After he had gone, the girls exchanged uncomfortable glances. Stella went to the doorway of the summerhouse and stood there uncertainly.

"It's time for refreshments, girls," she said, in what she hoped was a matter-of-fact voice. "Shall we have them here or up at the house?"

"At the house!" was voted unanimously, and then all exchanged shame-faced glances.

"We'll feel better about those gypsies to-morrow," said Irene Moore, as though trying to find an excuse for their "attack of nerves." "But that old hag they called Hulah is something you don't see except in nightmares. And after all, she *might* come back."

In the house, refreshed by crisp lettuce sandwiches, small cakes, and tall glasses of iced lemonade, the girls were more inclined to laugh at their fear of the gypsies.

"Those wandering tribes never pitch their camps long in one place," Meg Bronson pointed out. "Probably by to-morrow they will be gone and we'll never hear of them again."

"A consummation devoutly to be wished!"

murmured Lota, who had recently discovered a certain famous poet named William Shakespeare and was proud of her ability to quote—or misquote—him on certain occasions.

"Especially now that we are planning our hike," added Meg. "I wouldn't enjoy meeting Hulah and her pleasant friends—on a dark night, for instance."

Carolyn Cooper gave a little shriek and covered her ears with both hands.

"Make her stop!" she implored. "I don't want to give up our glorious hike, but I will if any one mentions that horrible Hulah woman to me again!"

This dire threat temporarily banished the name of Hulah from the conversation of the Outdoor Girls.

A short time later they parted, promising to meet again directly after dinner.

So, about eight o'clock of this particular evening, the girls began to drift back toward their leader's house. They had changed into frocks more appropriate for evening and the soft hues gave them the appearance of a bouquet of flowers.

At Stella's they found that Hal Duckworth had already arrived. He and Stella

were engaged in an earnest conversation when the girls burst in upon them.

"Here, you two!" cried Irene. "What are you up to, conspiring in a corner?"

Hal got up and came toward them. He was a good-looking youth and possessed a certain charm. Older people were apt to say that young Hal Duckworth had "a way" with him.

Now he greeted all the girls pleasantly, but his last and most lingering look was for Carolyn Cooper. One could scarcely blame him. Carolyn always sparkled at night. On this particular evening she was lovelier than usual in a pale blue frock with her bright hair fluffed out about her face.

"We weren't conspiring," he declared. "We were merely having an interesting conversation. Isn't that right, Stella?"

"Perfectly," agreed Stella gayly. "Tell them your news, Hal. They'll be thrilled."

"News!" drawled Meg. "I didn't think anything ever happened in Deepdale these days. What is it, Hal? Murder or theft?"

"Theft," returned Hal.

The girls found seats for themselves and Hal, at a corner of a massive table, faced them.

"I don't know whether you girls will be as interested as I am," he began. "But the robbery occurred under somewhat curious circumstances."

"Tell us," begged Carolyn. "We'll all promise to be pleasantly thrilled."

"I imagine poor old Fennelson was thrilled, too," said Hal. "Though not so pleasantly."

"Fennelson," repeated Stella thoughtfully. "I don't recall the name."

"He has a curio shop on Maple Street, pretty well back from the main street," Hal explained. "I've passed the place once or twice and I remember wondering how the old fellow ever managed to do any business. His shop is dingy and stuffed with curious junk and cheap jewelry."

Carolyn leaned forward in her chair. She looked startled, but no one seemed to notice.

"Hal!" she breathed. "Was it Fennelson's place that was robbed?"

"I'll say so," returned the young fellow. "The poor old man was found gagged and bound in the cellar under his shop. He had evidently been beaten about the head, for he was unconscious when they discovered him."

"Is he going to die?" gasped Lota.

"They don't think so. He recovered consciousness in the hospital; but unfortunately he was unable to describe his assailants. The scoundrel — or scoundrels — attacked him from behind. When the police found him he was blindfolded."

"And he never saw the robbers!" mused Irene.

"Only felt them," agreed Hal, with a grim smile.

Carolyn interrupted again and this time her agitation was apparent to them all.

"You haven't said a word, Hal, about what was stolen from the shop," she said, and looked at him with a sort of strained eagerness.

"About two thousand dollars' worth of jewelry and curios, they say."

"Oh!" gasped Carolyn, and sank back in her chair, limp and white.

CHAPTER IV

CAROLYN IS INTERESTED

CAROLYN COOPER'S collapse took her companions completely by surprise. They had been so interested in what Hal Duckworth was saying that, up to the moment that she had fallen back in her chair, looking white and ill, they had no notion that the robbery of the Fennelson Curio Shop was of any more personal interest to Carolyn than to the rest of them.

Now, the other girls ran to her. Hal jumped to his feet and looked conscience stricken.

Irene ran to the kitchen for a glass of water.

"Bring smelling salts, some one," called Lota distractedly.

"Might better stand back and give her a little air," Meg suggested practically.

At this Carolyn sat up and took a firm grip on the arms of the chair. She shook her

bright hair back from her face with an impatient gesture.

"I'm all right, girls," she said. "If you think I'm going to faint, you'll have a disappointment."

"A very pleasant disappointment, Carol," said Stella gently.

"I should say!" added Irene, returning with the glass of water. "Drink this, anyway. It can't hurt and it might help."

Carolyn drank the water and then looked appealingly at the girls. She smiled at Hal, hovering penitently in the background.

"You needn't look as if you'd murdered somebody," she told him. "It's only that your news sort of—knocked me out for a moment."

"But why should it?" Meg asked, mystified.

Irene added, with a nervous giggle:

"Yes, tell us! What was Mr. Fennelson to you?"

To this flippant remark Carolyn returned only an injured glance.

"It isn't Mr. Fennelson I'm worried about, silly—though I'm sorry enough for the poor old man. I was thinking of my family heirlooms."

After much persuasion and many interruptions that served only to delay the narrative, they finally coaxed the tale from Carolyn.

"I don't suppose the heirlooms are worth a great deal in actual cash," she told them. "But they were trinkets that have been in the family for—oh, I don't know how long. Some of them were mother's and so," her voice lowered and her eyes filled with tears, "they were very valuable to me——"

"We know, dear," said Stella soothingly, gently patting her hand.

"Some of the settings were loose," Carolyn continued, "and so Uncle Joe thought I'd better take them to Fennelson's and have them fixed before they were lost—the stones I mean, of course. Mr. Fennelson is an expert at such work."

Stella continued to pat her hand.

"And you took them?" she queried.

"That's the worst of it," wailed Carolyn. "I took them right away. You know that isn't like me! I usually wait a week before I actually get anything done. If I'd been true to my worse nature this time, I might still have the family heirlooms."

"When did you take these trinkets of

yours to Fennelson?" Hal asked. He frowned at Carolyn, but she knew he was thinking not of her but of a raided curio shop, of an unconscious old man found on the floor of his cellar, bound, gagged and brutally beaten about the head.

"Yesterday," she said, in response to his question.

"And the robbery was pulled off to-day. But even at that," he added, "you are merely assuming that these heirlooms of yours were among the loot carried off by the thief."

"No," said Carolyn mournfully, "I'm counting on my bad luck, Hal. If any one has to suffer because a cowardly scoundrel or two needed a little extra pin money, your little friend Carolyn is bound to be it!"

"Just the same, I wouldn't be too sure," Hal insisted. "Wait till Mr. Fennelson recovers from that crack on the head. Then he will be able to take an inventory of his stock and tell exactly what goods have been lost."

"How soon do you suppose he will be able to do that?" Carolyn asked, brightening.

"Neither the police nor the doctors seem to be very clear on that point," he said. "A hard blow on the head of a man of Fennel-

son's age isn't a thing to be taken lightly. As a matter of fact, there's some danger that, in this case, brain fever may result. In that event, of course, the poor old fellow will be laid up for an indefinite time with the possibility of death at the other end."

"Which would turn plain thieves into murderers," Meg observed.

Hal nodded gravely.

"It would that," he said. "And of course, Fennelson's being laid up in this way, the police are hampered at the very start of their investigation. If they knew just what type and quantity of goods had been stolen, they would be able to follow along that track, searching pawn shops and such places, in the end, almost certainly turning up a clue that would lead to the thieves. As it is, they must search for other clues—which are chiefly conspicuous by their absence."

He made this last observation under his breath as though speaking to himself.

Meg, who had been watching him shrewdly for some time, asked suddenly:

"You are very much interested in this case, aren't you, Hal?"

He looked at her, surprised; but, as he met her steady glance, the girl imagined that a

veil fell across his own. He said, lightly:

"Why, yes, of course I'm interested, especially so now that Carolyn appears to be involved."

An interruption occurred now in the form of Clem Field, who has already been introduced as Stella Sibley's cousin, and Dick Blossom. It appeared that Clem had overtaken Dick on his way to the same rendezvous and had given him a lift in his car.

The other two boys had heard of the robbery and expressed their sympathy to Carolyn upon hearing that she was, or might be, involved in it.

"However, we hope that your property was not among the stolen stuff," Clem said, and Hal added:

"That's what I've tried to tell her. There's no use anticipating bad fortune. And, in the meantime, why not enjoy the evening?"

The revived gayety was infectious. Carolyn was gradually won over to a more optimistic view of the robbery and, in the end, entered into the fun of the evening with much of her usual light-hearted zest.

It was a lovely party, as all parties at the home of the Outdoor Girls' leader were bound to be.

"Turn on the radio, some one," Stella cried. "You boys, take up the rugs, will you, and throw them into the corner? We want plenty of room to dance."

The request was promptly complied with. Rugs were removed, furniture thrust into corners, while music from one of New York's most famous jazz bands filled the room with irresistible syncopation.

After a while Clem, dancing with Irene close to the radio, turned it off. Silence descended upon the dancers. They stopped and looked indignantly at the perpetrator of the outrage.

"S O S," announced Clem, grinning. "Everybody off the air for ten minutes while we have some real music by Miss Stella Sibley with a possible dance by the young lady at my right."

"The young lady at his right," by name, Irene Moore, made a face at him.

"Bother!" she cried. "Who wants to clog dance when she might Charleston? Don't take the joy out of life, Clem. Turn on the radio, do!"

But Stella was already at the piano, her fingers busy with an Irish jig. Irene's feet could not resist it. She danced out into the

middle of the room, hands on hips, and leaped into a roguish clog, her short hair bobbing, merry eyes flashing.

Irene's audience urged her on, clapping in time to the rhythm until she was out of breath and Stella's clever fingers refused to strike another note.

Then they gathered around their leader and she played for them tender little ballads and they sang in fresh, clear, untrained voices that nevertheless caught the meaning of the melody, rendering it more truly than many a trained chorus could have done.

They sang "The Rosary," with Dick's deep voice carrying the bass. When the last rich chord melted away and became part of the vibrating stillness of the room, some one said, "Bravo!"

They turned to see Mr. Sibley sitting in a deep chair, the picture of content.

"Why, Dad," cried Stella, "when did you come in?"

"Don't stop," urged her father. "Sing it again. It sounded good!"

CHAPTER V

A MOONLIGHT WALK

THE young people sang again and yet again until they had exhausted their small repertoire.

Mr. Sibley sat back in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together, nodding with contentment.

When they stopped for lack of more material he smiled and got slowly from his chair.

"I'm glad you young folks can sing like that," he said. "I'd begun to believe that all any of you cared for these days was jazz——"

"Oh, Dad, you know better than that!" Stella reproached him. "We love jazz, of course. How else could we dance? But this sort of thing," with a gesture toward the scattered music, "is what we always come back to."

"Good!" said Mr. Sibley gravely. "No very great harm can come to you as long as

'that is the sort of thing you always come back to.' Good night, you rogues. Now I'm going away so that you can turn on jazz. Good night."

But somehow, the jazz had temporarily lost its charm. In response to a general request Clem Field tuned in to some fine organ music. To the poetry of a Bach fugue Stella alternately served refreshments and joined in a discussion of the proposed hiking trip.

Clem and Hal were inclined to be dubious when they heard of the plan, made by the girls only that afternoon. The incident of the gypsies as related to them by Irene—with all the trimmings that Irene could invent—only served to strengthen them in their belief that a hike of the sort the girls proposed was at best a hazardous undertaking.

"Five girls have no business hiking alone through all sorts of country," said Clem. "I don't like the idea at all."

"But you see," said Stella, as she passed the cake, "it isn't as though it were just *any* group of girls starting out on *any* sort of hike. It's the Outdoor Girls, you know, and there's a difference."

"Oh, of course," said Hal, with elaborate

scorn. "It's a protection, I suppose, a sort of invisible armor. You should carry a banner with you. 'We are the Outdoor Girls of Deepdale. Harm us at your peril.'"

"Might be a good idea, at that," chuckled Irene. "They say advertizing always pays."

When the party broke up at last, some two hours later, the determination of the girls to continue plans for the hike were not in the least affected by the out-spoken disapproval of the boys. If anything, they were the more determined to start as soon as the inevitable details could be arranged.

When Stella's guests turned from her door, Clem offered to give them a lift home, an offer which was accepted by all but Hal and Carolyn.

"It's such a heavenly night," said the latter, "we think we'll walk."

Carolyn and Hal waved to Stella and to the gay crowd in Clem's car, then turned down the dark street that led to Carolyn's home.

The girl sighed, and Hal said quickly:

"Tired? Perhaps we should have gone in the car, after all."

Carolyn shook her head.

"I'm not the least bit tired," she said. "It's lovely to be out in the fresh air. I feel as if I could walk for hours."

"What is it, then?"

Carolyn hesitated, then said impetuously:

"I'm terribly worried, Hal. I hated to spoil the party, and so I pretended to forget all about that poor old man—Mr. Fennelson—and those things I left with him."

"But you didn't forget," said Hal quickly. "I knew it, Carol, and I thought what a game little sport you were."

A short silence fell between them while Carolyn looked up at the stars and thought of a packet containing precious things.

"There was a locket," she said, in a hushed voice. "It was only a very little locket, Hal, but it was mother's and there was a picture of her in it——"

Hal squeezed her hand in quick sympathy.

"Don't get to thinking that those things are gone," he admonished her. "In a day or two Fennelson may be able to check up on his goods. Then we'll know definitely. The probability is," he added, "that your things are safe."

They had reached the house of Mr. Joe

Cooper, where Carolyn lived. The girl paused at the foot of the steps and held out her hand to him.

"We'll hope so," she said. "And in the meantime, you will do all you can to find out for me, won't you, Hal?"

The boy took her hand in a firm grip.

"I guess," he said, "you know you can count on me, Carol—for anything."

But the next day came and the next. Several days passed, and the proprietor of the Fennelson Curio Shop lay raving in delirium. It became increasingly uncertain whether the thief, or thieves, when caught, would be arraigned for just plain theft or murder.

Carolyn haunted the shop where the robbery had taken place. The heirlooms, left her by a mother now dead, had always seemed precious to her. Now that there was a possibility that they might be lost to her forever, they assumed a double importance.

The Fennelson store was guarded by detectives. Nothing could be added to or taken from the stock until the proprietor's recovery.

"But if I could just glance over what

things are left," said poor Carolyn again and again, "I could tell at once whether my heirlooms were among them!"

"Can't be done, Miss." The detective, though kindly, was firm. "What's fair for one, is fair for all. If we let you have your way we would probably have half of Deepdale rummaging over Fennelson's stock."

"I'm not 'half of Deepdale,' " Carolyn protested faintly. But the detective continued to shake his head and Carolyn walked away, discouraged.

Meanwhile, the Outdoor Girls went on with their plans for the hike. There were parental objections to be overruled; but this hurdle once taken successfully, they turned a totally deaf ear to the continued objections of Clem Field and Hal Duckworth.

They had one ally on their side, and this was Dick Blossom. Dick stoutly maintained his faith that the Outdoor Girls were amply able to look out for themselves.

"I don't believe there is any more danger to them than there would be to five boys starting out on the same adventure," he said. "The girls have proved often enough that they don't need any one to think for them in

case of an emergency. Why not leave them alone?"

"What a comfort you are, Dick," Meg and Lota chorused.

Dick gave them a mystified look and shook his head.

"You not only look alike," he complained, "but you even talk together. Now, I ask you! how is a poor fellow to know?"

Plans for the hike were at last matured to such an extent that the girls considered it safe to set the date of departure.

"Day after to-morrow, if it's a nice day," Stella announced, and her comrades shouted with glee.

"Two more sunrises will see us on our way," sang Lota.

"There is just one thing we haven't decided definitely, yet," Stella continued. "That is the matter of baggage. Lota and Carolyn still insist that we shall need more clean things than we can carry in our knapsacks. The rest of us don't care to be burdened with too much dunnage. Now, what shall we do?"

"As you say," returned Irene promptly. "You are the leader, Stella, and, as far as I'm concerned, what you say goes."

The others echoed the sentiment, though Carolyn and Lota looked a bit doubtful.

"Well," said Stella, "if you really want my opinion, I think that the lighter we travel, the better it will be for us. We shan't need any heavy camping outfit because we intend to stop at some hotel or farmhouse every night. We will carry a camp kit along with us and a few provisions. We can replenish when we pass through villages on our way."

"Day after to-morrow is too far away," sighed Lota. "I don't know how I am going to wait that long!"

"We'll have room in our packs for several changes of clothing," Stella continued, with a smile for Lota. "And if we feel a crying need for clean things, there will always be brooks and streams along the way——"

"Where we can do a little dab of washing and hang things up on the bushes to dry," finished Carolyn. "The way you tell it, Stella, makes it sound fascinatingly hoboish. Was I the one who spoke of luggage? Perish the thought!"

So another question—the last of any importance—was settled with satisfaction to every one. There was nothing left now but to wait for the day of the start.

This dawned clear and bright, with a cool breeze to temper the sun's heat.

"Ideal! A day made to order," said Meg, as she regarded the pleasant prospect from the window of her bedroom. "Hurry up, Lo. We mustn't keep the others waiting!"

They had agreed the day before to meet at Farmers' Tavern, an old deserted house on the edge of the woods.

"It's a sort of central point for all of us," Stella had pointed out "and as good a place as any to start from. We'll meet there at nine o'clock sharp. Don't any of you dare be late!"

The girls remembered that admonition when they were all gathered at the rendezvous—with the exception of Stella herself!

"She reminds us to be on time—and then turns up late," remarked Lota.

"It's one thing to preach, and another to practice," returned Irene flippantly. "Anyway," with a chuckle, "here come the boys."

"Hal and Dick," counted Carolyn. "But I don't see Clem. I wonder if he isn't going to get here to see us off."

"Much you care," said Irene mischieviously, "as long as Hal Duckworth is among those present!"

There was a burst of merry greetings as the boys reached them.

Hal went directly to Carolyn's side—a fact which did not pass unremarked by the mischievous eyes of Miss Irene Moore.

"Straight as a homing pigeon," she murmured, quite loud enough for Carolyn to hear.

"Listen, Carol," said Hal, "I've word of Fennelson——"

"Yes?" breathed Carolyn. "What, Hal?"

"Nothing much yet. But the old chap is getting better. His recovery will probably be slow, but the authorities hope that they will be able to get some badly needed information from him before long."

Before Carolyn could reply a motor car swept about a curve in the road and came to a stop within a few feet of them. Clem was in the driver's seat with Stella beside him.

Stella jumped to the ground and ran toward them.

"Sorry to be late," she called. "But it was all Clem's fault. He told me to wait for him. I——"

Hal came forward suddenly and caught her wrist.

"What have you got here?" he demanded.

CHAPTER VI

THE BROOCH

TAKEN by surprise by Hal Duckworth's strange action and the eager tone of his voice, Stella Sibley stammered:

"This—oh, I forgot—nothing, really. Just a little brooch I picked up near the summerhouse. I thought it was a curious design and brought it along to show——"

"Let me see it, please."

There was still something in Hal's tone that caused Stella to look at him curiously. She handed the brooch to him without comment.

"What is it, Hal?" she asked, as the lad turned it over and over in his fingers. "You can't possibly think it is anything important?"

"Have you any idea how it came to be near the summerhouse?" Hal asked.

"Not a very clear one," returned Stella. "I was quite sure none of the girls had dropped it, for they don't wear such stuff.

I asked the cook and the upstairs maid, but they disowned it. I can't imagine unless one of those gypsies dropped it the other day—" she paused, making the suggestion a question addressed to Hal.

The latter nodded.

"That might be the answer," he agreed. "At any rate, you won't mind my keeping this trinket, will you?"

Although somewhat surprised, Stella agreed to the request readily enough.

"Why, of course not," she said lightly. "I can't think of any occasion when I would be likely to wear it. I simply brought it along as a curiosity—and a memento of the gypsies' visit."

"All right, thanks," said Hal, and pocketed the trinket.

It was only Meg who noticed that the simple action was accompanied by a very thoughtful look. She noticed, too, that Hal stared straight over Stella's head, like one who looks into the future and sees visions. Meg decided, however, for reasons of her own, to keep these observations to herself for the present.

Now that their leader had joined them, the Outdoor Girls were eager to be off.

"If we expect to make ten miles before sundown we've got to be at it," stated Lota. "'Bye, boys," she said, waving to them. "See you next Christmas, if we have luck!"

But they were not to be rid of the boys so easily. The latter accompanied them for a considerable distance along the first lap of their journey, and even then turned back with marked reluctance.

"We should be going with you," Clem said.

"Which wouldn't do at all," laughed Irene. "Think how disgustingly safe and protected we would be with three stalwart youths along to smooth the path for us. No, thanks! We'll write you a letter about it!"

But after the boys had finally turned back and were crunching along the hard-worn trail toward Deepdale, the Outdoor Girls, for all their vaunted independence, felt suddenly lonely and deserted. For some unknown reason, the woods appeared to have lost some of its friendly sparkle. They stood for some time, looking back toward the place where they had last seen the boys.

"Well, come on," said Stella finally. "We'll not get anywhere by standing still."

"Do tell," giggled Irene. "Lead on, and we'll suit our pace to yours!"

Gradually, as they pressed farther and farther into the heart of the woods, the old zest for adventure returned to them. They felt gloriously free. They were no longer dependent upon street cars, automobiles, railroad trains. As long as their feet held out they were reasonably certain to get where they were going, without recourse to artificial means of locomotion.

However, they were to find that, after several hours of travel, even the stoutest pair of feet will grow tired and demand a rest.

"The very next place we come to that looks good, we'll stop and have lunch," Stella promised. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I feel hollow from my head clear down to my toes."

"I've been seeing visions of ham sandwiches for the past two hours," Carolyn confessed. "If we don't eat soon I'll start chewing grass."

Meg and Carolyn had been walking in advance. Now Meg stopped and pointed through the trees. Her expression was one of extreme disgust.

"Look!" she cried. "We are back on the road again!"

The girls in the rear joined her. Looking

ahead, they also saw the thin, dusty ribbon of road. Its parched glare contrasted unpleasantly with the cool comfort of the woods.

"Bother! Now what shall we do?" cried Irene discontentedly.

"Well, we knew the path would lead us out onto the road sooner or later," Stella remarked philosophically. "Only, it happens to be sooner, that's all." She pushed past Meg and Carolyn and went on along the path.

The girls came out upon the road and looked about them with interest. Although they had been over this same route quite frequently by automobile; afoot, it all looked new to them. Now they noticed many pleasant details; the almost tropical luxuriance of the verdure that flanked the road, the rock-studded bank, the wild flowers that grew between the crevices of the rock, making even that harsh surface beautiful.

The girls picked the flowers as they walked until each had gathered an armful of fragrant color.

"Now we've got them, what do we do with them?" Meg wanted to know. "Wild flowers aren't particularly practical on a cross-country hike."

"I'll make me a chaplet for my brow," sang Irene. She broke off and added with a chuckle; "That's an excellent idea. We'll make wreaths and crown each other——"

"That's saying it with flowers," giggled Lota. "All right, I'm game, if the rest are."

So they sat down at the side of the dusty road and busied themselves with the flowers. They were glad to sit down, for their feet were protesting again. And their task was a pleasant one.

When the wreaths were finished they "crowned" each other with a good deal of ceremony and giggles and so-called compliments that did not compliment.

"Our heads don't match the rest of us," complained Irene. "A crown of posies certainly deserves something better than a knicker suit beneath it."

"I suppose we should be garbed in flowing Grecian robes," giggled Lota, "with girdles of gold about our lissom waists and sandals on our fairy feet——"

"Stop her, some one," protested Meg. "She may be my twin, but there are limits to what even a twin should be asked to stand!"

Lota looked pained.

"Can't I be poetical if I want to?" she inquired. "A hike like this should be full of poetry——"

A scream from Carolyn temporarily diverted their attention. She was pointing wildly into the woods.

"I saw something!" she cried. "It was an animal. I think it was a w-wolf!"

CHAPTER VII

BEWARE THE WOLF

At Carolyn Cooper's preposterous statement Irene giggled heartlessly.

"Poor girl! She thinks she's Little Red Riding Hood. Where," in a coaxing tone, "did you see your wolf, dear?"

Carolyn became suddenly indignant.

"I'm not joking," she said. "I did see an animal, a big one, over there among the trees. When I screamed, it disappeared."

"No wonder!" observed Meg dryly. "You scared the poor thing."

"Oh, well, come on," cried Lota impatiently. "We were going to eat half an hour ago and I can't see that we're any nearer it now."

"All right," agreed Stella. "The first likely spot we see, that's where we camp."

"I only hope it's far enough away from that—beast," said Carolyn nervously. "Oh, you may laugh, if you like," in response to the amused glances of the girls. "But I tell

you I did see something in the woods and I didn't like the looks of it, either."

Of course none of her companions believed Carolyn's "wolf story." But they did imagine more than once during the next few moments that something was trailing them among the bushes and shrubs along the side of the road. The snapping of a twig, some loose stones rolling down into the road; slight sounds but significant to the woods-wise girls.

When they paused for a moment to make a survey of the landscape, these sounds stopped, too. When they moved on again, so did their shadowy trailer.

Of course they all knew that Carolyn's tale of a wolf was preposterous. Wolves did not roam the woods near Deepdale. Still, what was it that trailed them so persistently and mysteriously?

All this time they had kept an eye out for a convenient place in which to rest and refresh themselves before continuing on the second heat of the day's hike.

Lota discovered it, a miniature plateau among the rocks, so high above the road that one had to climb to reach it.

The girls hailed it with approval and, like

monkeys, clambered up the steep bank. Stones, loosened by their feet, rolled down into the road, but they never noticed.

Once settled, they explored their knapsacks hungrily. True to agreement, they carried few provisions, each girl having packed her own lunch of a few sandwiches, a piece of cake, fruit and a pint thermos bottle containing hot coffee or milk. Most of the girls had chosen milk, for they knew the value of that nourishing food.

They ate ravenously, for the hours in the open had made them as hungry as a pack of wolves. The available supply of food vanished like dew beneath a summer sun.

Stella viewed this ruthless demolition with a rueful eye.

"We'll have to do a good five miles more this afternoon," she observed, "or something tells me we will go hungry to bed to-night."

"The way I feel now, that won't worry me," Meg said lazily. "I think I could lie down right here and sleep the clock around."

"Well, don't," retorted Stella unfeelingly. "We've a long hike ahead of us before we can call it a day, you know."

Something stirred in the bushes behind them. The girls started and faced the sound.

There was a moment of breathless silence while they listened, every sense alert.

Only silence rewarded their strained attention. They relaxed, exchanging sheepish glances.

"What's the matter with us, anyhow?" Meg demanded irritably. "Is it possible that we are *all* 'hearing things?' "

"Carolyn's wolf story has upset us," Irene suggested. "I've been 'hearing things' ever since," she confessed impulsively.

"So have I," confessed Lota, staring, wide-eyed, at Irene.

"And I," added steady-nerved Stella. "I know it sounds silly, but it is as if something's been trailing us through the woods."

"Well, it wasn't a wolf, anyway," said Meg Bronson crossly. "That's too silly."

"I wonder—oh, it couldn't be—still, it might—" Irene paused and flushed uncomfortably as she found the girls staring at her.

"What *are* you talking about?" demanded Lota.

"I was wondering if those gypsies up at Stella's—if they could have followed us," she explained disjointedly. "That horrible Hulah——"

"Hush!" cried Carolyn sharply. "If they *should* be about——"

"Oh, nonsense!" Stella jumped to her feet and began to gather up the remains of her lunch. She spoke loudly and with unusual vehemence, proving that mention of the impertinent gypsies had not left her entirely unmoved. "I think we are all acting like perfect simpletons. It's time we moved on!"

The other girls followed their leader's example, hastily packing knapsacks, picking up bits of paper and drinking cups so that their camp site might be left neat and in good order. They were eager to leave a place that was suddenly filled for them with shadows and a mysterious dread. After all, something had been following them. They had all heard it. They could not all be mistaken!

In a suddenly valorous mood, Irene Moore suggested that they search the woods in the immediate vicinity. But Stella shook her head.

"It's a waste of time," she said. "And we can't afford to waste a minute, not if we hope to get our stint of hiking done to-day."

"Besides," added Carolyn, "what we don't know won't hurt us."

"I'm not so sure of that!" returned Irene.

Suddenly she straightened up. Her look became concentrated, intent. "Girls, what—is—that?" she demanded.

All came to a sudden halt. Carolyn gave a little shriek and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"What did I tell you?" she cried for the second time within the space of a few minutes. "It's the wolf!"

What they all saw was a large, bushy brush that stood up above a clump of stunted bushes close to them, a brush that waved gently to and fro!

It was the tail of some animal, no doubt of that!

"But a wolf doesn't wag its tail!"

Irene dashed forward, parted the bushes.

"Hesper, you rogue!" she cried. "Come out of that!"

CHAPTER VIII

A ROGUE DISCOVERED

THE Outdoor Girls stared.

The waving brush suddenly drooped, disappeared. From between the bushes, held aside by Irene Moore's hand, crept a beautiful, shaggy beast. Its proud head was lowered, its tawny, magnificent coat swept the ground, its brown eyes begged forgiveness.

Irene did not melt before that appeal. Her expression was stern and disapproving.

Behind her, the other girls were trying to digest the fact that Carolyn's wolf was none other than Irene's thoroughbred collie dog, Hesper.

Some one giggled. Irene held up a warning hand.

"This is not a laughing matter," she said, in a solemn tone. "Hesper has been a wicked, wicked dog! He has disobeyed his mistress. I have no use for bad dogs!"

Poor Hesper's brush drooped lower. He

was the picture of doggish distress. His eyes implored.

"Oh, Irene, don't be cruel," laughed Stella. "The poor dog has apologized the best he knows how."

"And one should always accept a gentleman's apology," added Carolyn Cooper demurely.

"Yes, but what am I going to do with him?" Irene wanted to know.

"Take him along as a protection against the gypsies," suggested Lota Bronson.

Although this was said jokingly, the idea more than half appealed to the girls. It would be pleasant to have a protector as big and strong and willing as Hesper on their hike.

It was Stella who shook her head.

"Not so good. There are a great many places, hotels and farmhouses and such, where we would be welcome and a dog would not," she reminded them. "He is bound to be in the way."

Irene stretched out a hand and the collie came to her. He thrust his cold muzzle against her palm, the beautiful brush began a faint hopeful wig-wag.

"You're bad, but I can't help loving

you," Irene scolded, and the wig-wag became more pronounced. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Why not take him along as far as Mollie's?" Meg suggested. "Then we could get her to ship him back home again."

This suggestion pleased the girls. Even Stella nodded approval.

"I guess that's the best way," she said. "If we took him back to Deepdale now we'd lose a whole day. Let him come with us as far as Mollie's, anyway."

The hikers started on again, uncomfortably aware that they had lost time and must make up for it by an extra burst of speed. They scrambled down to the road and swung off at a merry pace, Hesper galloping at their heels.

The girls had marked Draketown, a village some ten or eleven miles from Deepdale, as the end of the first day's hike. They knew that Draketown boasted a hotel of sorts where they could probably be accommodated for the night, and it was toward this refuge that they now eagerly turned their steps.

However, after the first two or three miles had been covered, they began to slow

down a little. Their feet were tired, the heat was oppressive.

They found a path that ran for some distance through the woods, parallel to the road. This they took, grateful for the shade and the sweet, pungent smell of the damp earth.

Once they came to a brook. Without comment Irene sat down and began to pull off her shoes and stockings.

The others paused and Stella said resignedly:

"Would you mind telling us what *is* the big idea?"

"I'm going to cool my feet if we never get to Draketown," Irene retorted resolutely. "If you girls want to go on without me, suit yourselves. I'll still have Hesper."

But her companions did not go on without her. Instead, they sat down and removed their own shoes and stockings and paddled blissfully in the cold water.

Hesper ran down into the water and barked and splashed and misbehaved himself like any riotous puppy, instead of the full-grown dog he was.

After a while the girls dried their feet and reluctantly pulled on their shoes again.

"We should be able to get on faster now," observed Stella. "And Draketown can't be very much farther off."

But though the girls tramped steadily on for a long time, it seemed to them that they came no nearer to their goal.

At last they began to pass farmhouses—a hopeful sign. These habitations became more and more frequent. At one of them a small white terrier came dashing out to yap at Hesper's heels. The collie gave the little dog one disgusted glance and trotted on his way with an air of dignified detachment.

"You could almost see his lip curl," chuckled Carolyn. "If there's one thing I envy you, Irene Moore, it's that dog."

"He is a darling," Irene admitted. "Though bad!"

The hikers soon found that the signs were not deceitful. At the foot of a low hill Draketown lay spread out before them, a straggling little village with two or three stores, a blacksmith's shop, an auto repair shop, and what was called, by courtesy, a "hotel."

However, in their present mood the girls were not critical. Ahead of them lay food,

shelter, a place to lay their heads for the night. That was all they cared about.

As they passed down the crooked main street of the village two or three children paused in their playing to stare at them curiously. The girls showed the effect of the long hike; their faces streaked with perspiration and the grime of the road, their short hair touseled by the wind, their shoes covered with dust. But for all that, they were gloriously happy.

"I expect we look like tramps," observed Carolyn. "And the funny thing is, I don't care a bit."

"We're turning into gypsies already," added Lota. "Gypsies and the dust of the road belong together."

"They're always dirty, if that's what you mean," Meg said prosaically.

The Outdoor Girls paused before a weather-stained building whose door bore the sign, Draketown Inn. It was not an inviting looking hostelry, but the travelers knew they must make the best of it. They went up on the porch and, seeing no one about, Stella rang the bell.

After a considerable delay there was the

sound of shuffling footsteps and a woman appeared inside the screen door.

She was a very thin woman, the type sometimes described as "scrawny," and her glance was habitually suspicious. Her glance passed over the girls, then fastened, with marked dislike, upon Hesper. The collie, seeing himself thus observed, thumped a friendly greeting with his tail.

"Take that dog away from here!" cried the woman in a shrill voice. "I won't have dogs about the place!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ALARM

"But this is a very nice dog!" said Irene Moore demurely, in response to the words of the woman who had come to the door of the hotel. "Hesper won't make a bit of trouble. You see what a sweet disposition he has!"

Hesper eyed the woman ingratiatingly and thumped his tail.

The thin woman behind the screen door looked increasingly suspicious. With a warning glance at Irene, Stella Sibley ventured to explain.

"We've been hiking since early morning," she said. "We really had no intention of bringing the dog with us, but he followed without our knowing. We are sorry if you don't like dogs, but if you would put up with him for just one night— We are going on again the first thing in the morning."

This was only the beginning of a long, tiresome argument. But finally the hikers won. Hesper should be tied securely in the

yard where he could not worry the cow or kill the chickens.

The Outdoor Girls, after another suspicious scrutiny on the part of the thin woman, were admitted to the house.

"I think she would like to tie us outside with Hesper," Lota whispered to Stella.

However, when the woman finally led them to the second floor and opened the doors of two adjoining rooms the girls saw that they could expect to be fairly comfortable for the night.

Two double beds and a cot, together with austere dressers, tables, and chairs, furnished the two rooms. Rag mats were on the floor and the pitchers on the washstands were soon filled with sparkling cold water. Everything was immaculately clean.

The girls washed their hands and faces, brushed their hair until it was once more sleek and orderly, and removed as much dust as possible from their outer garments.

"Maybe our landlady will view us with more favor now," laughed Carolyn. "We do look a little more respectable."

They went down to a well cooked, old-fashioned dinner. There were several others at the table besides themselves. These were

almost all elderly people and their interest in the young hikers was so frank and their curiosity so openly expressed that the girls were glad to make their escape as soon as possible after dinner.

They found a sad and chastened Hesper tied to a staple outside the barn. He jumped up eagerly at sight of the girls, but slumped down again when Irene made no move to release him.

"Can't do it, old boy," she said, twining her fingers in the thick white ruff about his neck. "I've promised to keep you tied up until morning. But at daybreak we'll be off again."

At the kitchen door, they wheedled a plate of scraps from the cook—who was a plump, comfortable-looking girl and not in the least suspicious of them—and set it down before Hesper. The dog gulped the food ravenously and thereafter appeared more resigned to the ignominy of an imprisoning rope.

The girls sat about on the grass, talking over the events of the day until dusk descended like a thick mist, blurring outlines and filling the place with fantastic shadows.

"I think maybe we'd better go to bed," said Stella, after a while. "We want to get

up at the crack of dawn to-morrow, you know."

"Yes, come on, everybody," said Lota, yawning. "I could fall asleep right here."

Irene delivered a parting pat upon the head of the despondent Hesper, bade him be a "good dog," and followed the others toward the house.

Half an hour later the last of the Outdoor Girls had drifted into dreamland. But out in the lonely yard, Hesper mourned long and audibly. His world had deserted him and he was inconsolable.

How many hours later it happened, the girls did not know. They were dragged from an exhaustion-drugged sleep to sudden and violent wakefulness.

A dreadful commotion was going on in the hall outside their rooms. Shouts of "Help! Murder! Thieves!" resounded in their startled ears. There was a terrific thumping and banging, a muttered imprecation, a sharp thud.

"Now I've got you!" cried a masculine voice.

"Hold him, Bud," in a woman's determined tones. "Hold on to him now, while I fetch a light."

The girls rushed to the door and flung it open. They stared, open-mouthed, at the oddest tableau they had ever seen. A small group had gathered, composed of the cook, the waitress, a few of the guests of the inn. In the center of this excited group a man lay prone upon the floor. He appeared to be grappling with something.

"The thief!" cried Lota, excitedly.

"Be quiet, you goose!" said Meg. "It isn't a thief he's got hold of. It isn't even a man. It's a—" as the light in the hands of the landlady wavered closer—"dog!"

The man on the floor appeared to realize this at the same time. He struggled to his feet amid a chorus of half-smothered chuckles from the audience. His stubby blunt fingers were entwined among the coarse hairs of a collie's white ruff.

"Here's your burglar," he said sullenly, as the landlady raised the oil lamp high above her head. "Here's your thief and murderer! Pity you had to make such a fuss about a bloomin' dog!"

The landlady bent forward and stared at a very much dejected collie.

"Well, how was I to know?" she replied tartly. "I wake in the dark and hear some-

thing come soft-like up the stairs. It stops somewhere in the hall here and seems to be trying to open a door. What was I to think? A dog, eh?" She bent a grim look upon the collie. "Out upon you!" In her anger she took a step forward, her hand upraised.

The collie did not move nor growl, but the hairs began to stiffen on his neck.

"Hesper!" said Irene sharply. "Come here to me!"

The collie shook himself free of the hand that still gripped his ruff. He came and sat down close to his mistress, looking up at her. It was evident that he awaited further instructions.

The group in the hall had melted away, some tittering, some growling because of rest unnecessarily disturbed. Only the grim landlady and the broad-shouldered youth who had wrestled with Hesper remained. The latter was probably a hired helper. The girls remembered having seen him working about the place that evening.

Now he looked in scowling uncertainty at his employer.

"Want I should put the brute out?" he inquired.

"Oh, please," Irene spoke entreatingly, her

hand on Hesper's head, "let him stay in here with us the rest of the night. I promise he won't make any trouble."

The thin woman snorted.

"Humph! Trouble enough he's made already, scaring the life out of honest folk. Knew I was a fool, taking in a dog."

"He was just trying to find me," Irene pleaded. "He will be all right with us."

The woman shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Keep him where you like as long as he's out from under my feet," she retorted tartly. "And I'll not have him here another night. To-morrow he gets out!"

In the morning the hikers found the proprietress of the Draketown Inn quite eager to get rid of Hesper as soon as possible. And since neither the Outdoor Girls nor Hesper had discovered any great love for the disagreeable landlady, they did nothing to thwart this ambition.

They ate an early breakfast while, at their request, a lunch was put up for them in the kitchen. The girls paid well for all these accommodations, beside being taxed liberally for two dead chickens and a ruined screen door, these damages being the result of Hesper's midnight escapade.

Hesper hung his head while the list of his villainies was being compiled, but for all that, the girls doubted that he was sincerely penitent.

"He had a look in his eyes that said he wished he had killed another chicken while he was about it, just to make it a good night," Meg Bronson chuckled. "What a time he must have had before he decided to come into the house and look up Irene!"

"And then had to ruin a door screen just for good luck!" Lota added.

"Well, how else could he get in?" retorted Irene. "Be reasonable, do, and look on the poor dog's side!"

The hikers were free of Draketown Inn at last. With a substantial lunch to last them through the day—with all her faults, the grim landlady did know about food—with a delicious breakfast in the background and the prospect of seeing Mollie and Roy Anderson before the day was out, it is small wonder that they found their spirits soaring.

The hikers stepped out buoyantly, reveling in the crisp air of early morning, in the dew still sparkling on shrub and bush, in the long, long road that stretched out endlessly

before them and which they had sworn to conquer.

"How queer it seems to think of Mollie Billette as Mollie Anderson," said Irene to Stella as they swung along the highway.

They made good time through the hours of the morning. As Meg put it, they had "got on their striding legs." Stella encouraged this sudden burst of energy and herself led the pace, "stepping out" bravely.

"If we can break the back of the hike in the morning while we're fresh and the air is cooler," she explained, "then we can afford to linger a little over lunch and set an easier pace down the last long stretch."

This seemed to them all a sensible contention; so they continued the hike until the sun was not only high in the heavens but had begun its slow progress toward the west.

Presently Stella paused. For some time they had been following an old, disused wagon trail through the woods. They knew that if they followed it long enough it would lead them to a small, woodland lake and—Mollie Anderson's bungalow.

But just at this point the road widened. Trees had been chopped down here and there,

leaving only blackened stumps. At its base a steep slope revealed a sparkling, silvery pool.

"I bet we'd find good fishing there," said Meg Bronson. "A splendid place to lunch, anyway, Stella. What do you think?"

"We have made well over six miles this morning," Stella returned. "I should say we deserve some food!"

Stella, Meg, and Carolyn sat down at once on the soft ground and spread out the lunch between them while Irene and Lota went down to the pool.

"For a drink," Irene flung back. "We'll bring you all some."

Hesper followed, excited, as always, by the water. When the two girls and the dog reached the banks of the pool, Irene and Lota stopped. Not so, Hesper! He plunged straight in, shaking himself and snorting and behaving in an altogether ridiculous manner.

"Better make the best of this day," Irene said, shaking a finger at him. "It's the last you will have with this crowd. Oh, you bad dog, stop it!" as he came closer and some sparkling drops fell upon her and Lota. "We are not ready to take a bath yet. All we want is a drink."

"I don't like to drink this," Lota said, drawing back. "It looks as if it had been standing too long. Let's hunt about and see if we can't find a spring."

Further back in the woods they did find a spring, just a thin trickle of water, but as clear and pure as sunlight. They took long, delicious drinks of this, then filled their canteens and started back.

When they neared the spot where they had left the rest of their party they were surprised and a little startled to hear the sound of voices, several voices, raised in angry altercation.

"Seems to me this will bear looking into!" Irene said, and hurried forward.

CHAPTER X

HESPER IS USEFUL

IRENE MOORE paused suddenly, gasped, and took a step backward. Lota caught her arm and whispered:

"What is it?"

There was no need for Irene to answer the question. In a moment Lota saw for herself.

"The gypsies!" she cried.

Irene quickly put a hand over her mouth to silence her.

"Please wait a minute," she commanded. "Listen!"

There were two gypsies in the clearing. Irene recognized Hulah, but the other's back was toward her so that she could not make sure of her identity.

Evidently, the gypsies had come upon the girls just when they were in the act of distributing the lunch. Now the one called Hulah moved forward. Mouthing and grinning, she held out her hand.

"Just a bite to eat, pretty ladies," she whined. "Just a bite for a poor old hungry woman who has touched no food since yesterday morn."

The girls knew this was untrue, for, besides seeing that she looked exceedingly well fed, they noticed a half loaf of hard rye bread protruding from the old woman's sagging pocket.

"If you have not eaten, it is your own fault," said Meg boldly, and pointed to the bread.

The leer on the face of the old hag faded. Her thin lips pressed together in an ugly line.

"You say I lie!" she shrieked at them. "Hulah does not lie! You shall pay for that."

She advanced upon them, hands outstretched, clawlike fingers crooked.

"I have asked for a bite to eat," she said, in a voice that shook with fury. "You have refused an old woman bread. You tell me I lie. Now I will take your food from you."

"Take it all," urged the younger woman. "Let the impudent ones know what it is to go hungry!"

The girls swiftly gathered up the lunch

and jumped to their feet, backing away from the menacing gypsies.

But Hulah advanced, followed by the other woman. The old hag shrieked imprecations.

Lota started forward, apparently determined to come to the rescue of her chums. But Irene caught her arm.

"Don't!" she whispered excitedly. "I know a trick worth two of that!"

She pointed to Hesper, who had found the burrow of a rabbit and was nosing at it rapturously. He was still wet from his gambols in the stream.

Irene whistled, a shrill note that pricked Hesper's ears forward and then brought him dashing up the bank. When Irene and Lota broke from cover and confronted the startled gypsies, the collie was close at their heels.

Carolyn cried out in relief. Meg and Stella relaxed and sighed audibly.

Hesper, blissfully unconscious of anything unusual in the situation, dashed into the center of the group and shook himself. It happened that he was nearest the old hag, Hulah, so that the latter was treated to a generous shower bath.

Hulah cried out at the dog, scowling at him furiously.

Surprised, Hesper paused in the act of another shake and looked at the old woman. It was evident that he did not like what he saw. The old person in the queer-colored rags who snarled at him like one of his own kind was a suspicious character, he felt. Certainly, she would bear watching.

This inward feeling found outward expression in a low growl. Hesper ceased to grin. His jaws began to look like a wolf's jaws; long-fanged, vicious. He moved forward a pace or two, the long hairs on his neck bristling.

"Irene, look out!" cried Stella. "He'll spring on them!"

Irene leaned forward and inserted her fingers firmly beneath the dog's collar. Then she looked up at the cowering gypsies.

"You'd better go," she advised gently. "I can't tell how long I can hold the dog—nor how long I shall want to," she added significantly.

This was enough. One parting look at the bared fangs of the collie and the gypsy women turned and fled. Hesper growled savagely and made a lunge for them, but

Irene did not relax her hold upon his collar.

"Easy does it, boy," she coaxed. "They are going, going, gone! That's all right, as long as they go," she added, impressing the lesson upon him. "But, if they come back, you know what to do!"

Hesper growled deep down in his throat, a sign that he knew precisely what was expected of him. Then Irene released her hold on his collar. The dog trotted over to the spot from which the gypsies had disappeared, and sat down, ears cocked forward, eyes watchful. An occasional low growl assured his friends that Hesper was on guard. No harm would come to them while he was at his post!

Though reassured, the girls found that their woodland glade had lost a good deal of its charm for them. Every snapping twig, every rustle of leaves, spoke to them of the gypsies and their possible return.

"What shall we do?" Stella hesitated in the act of redistributing the lunch. "Shall we eat here, anyway, or go on and find another place?"

Carolyn was all for following this latter suggestion. But the other girls, being exceedingly hungry, cried her down.

"Let's eat first," said Meg. "I'm starved."

"Nothing very frightful can happen to us with Hesper on guard," added Lota.

"He certainly did look savage," chuckled Irene. "With those bared fangs he was more wolf than collie."

"He had no liking for those gypsies," added Stella, "and he didn't care who knew it either!"

So it was decided that they would eat where they were and move on out of the gypsies' neighborhood as quickly as they could after lunch.

The meal over, they lingered no longer than was absolutely necessary in the pretty glade. The gypsies had robbed it of all glamour and they were eager to be on their way again.

"Besides, we'll see Mollie soon," Stella Sibley added. "And maybe she won't be surprised!"

"I only hope we find her at home," Meg observed. "She and Roy may have gone out——"

"And they'll come home to find us perched, like a row of little sparrows, on the front doorstep," chuckled Irene.

"I hardly think we'll find them out," Stella contributed. "Judging from Mollie's letters, I imagine there aren't many places where they could go. There's the lake and a sort of little amusement park at one end of it with a water slide and a see-saw and a couple of swings where the cottage people go to work off their high spirits. Aside from that there isn't much to draw them away from home."

When they had traveled only a little way they encountered a path that appeared to lead down to the road. They decided to follow this and, when they reached the road, scan it for signs of the gypsy caravan.

A long stretch of empty road was the only reward of this detour. Their gypsy friends had either passed on ahead of them or were some distance in the rear. The girls did not know which and they did not care. The mere assurance that the gypsies were not in the immediate vicinity was enough to raise their spirits and send them happily on their way.

They retraced their steps and found the wagon road again. After about an hour more of the stiff pace set by Stella they found that the dimly marked path veered sharply,

leading them direct into the heart of the woods.

"We're getting there!" cried Irene joyfully. "We can't have very much further to go."

"An hour or two more like this, and we should arrive," Stella agreed. "We've made good time to-day."

But toward the end of the long trail, their pace necessarily lagged. It was nearer three hours than two when they found themselves at last nearing the end of that day's hike.

Stella was the first to catch the shimmer of water ahead of them. She stood still until the girls joined her; then with a little gesture of triumph, stretched out her hand.

"The lake," she said. "If any one should ask you, I think we are pretty good Indians. At least, we know how to follow a trail!"

"And in just a few minutes we'll see Mollie," Irene said.

The heavy woodland extended almost down to the water's edge. Here and there trees had been cut down to permit the building of a summer bungalow. One such bungalow housed the newlyweds, Mollie and Roy Anderson. That much the girls knew, but beyond this they had no information,

nothing to guide them except the name of the bungalow.

"'Bide-a-Wink,' they call it," Stella mused. "I suppose we will just have to keep on walking until we come upon it."

Carolyn was sitting on a rock, prodding some loose stones lying in a damp hollow with a stick she had picked up during the course of the hike. Now, she jumped suddenly to her feet with a scream of fright.

"Run, girls!" she cried wildly. "Run!"

"SNAKE!" SHE GASPED. "FOR GOODNESS' SAKE, RUN!"

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CHAPTER XI

THE SNAKE

For a moment the Outdoor Girls, with the exception of Carolyn Cooper, could see nothing to run from. Bewildered and considerably startled, they stared at Carolyn. She continued to point at the pile of loose stones.

"Snake!" she gasped. "Copperhead! For goodness' sake, run!"

Now the other girls saw it—an ugly brown body that slithered from its nest among the stones. It moved with amazing speed. Possibly its one instinct was toward flight, but, unfortunately, it made directly toward Stella Sibley. Stella jumped, but the snake swerved too, at an angle, so that the girl came within an ace of stepping on its slimy, uncoiled body.

Stella screamed. The reptile darted toward her. It seemed that only a miracle could save her.

A hairy body catapulted through the air

and caught the reptile by the neck just behind its vicious head.

Hesper's jaws snapped. The body of the snake writhed and thrashed the ground. But when the dog dropped it, it was dead!

"A hero twice in one day!" Irene dropped to the ground and flung her arms about the collie's neck. "You old darling, you may have saved Stella's life!"

It is to be feared that in the next few minutes Hesper became a very much spoiled and pampered dog. The girls could not make enough of him and Irene praised him unstintedly. He began to strut around with a conscious air of pride as though to say, "I am the dog that did this! Take a good look at me!"

He wanted to take the snake along with him and was very much disappointed when the girls insisted upon thwarting this desire. He lingered near his prize and Irene called to him three times before he finally left it and trotted after them.

The incident of the snake served to remind the girls that other unpleasant things were to be met with in the woods besides the gypsy, Hulah.

The hikers made half the circuit of the

lake before they discovered Mollie's cottage.

It was an attractive little place, smaller than any they had yet seen. It cuddled down amid a grove of trees. Branches reached out toward the windows, almost touching them. Vines covered the tiny porch, making it a mass of green.

"A doll's house!" cried Carolyn. "Isn't it darling?"

" 'Bide-a-Wink', it says." Meg read the green and gold sign over the door. "I'd like to bide a year!"

"A love of a place," said Lota. "Just where you might expect to find a pair of newlyweds."

"Speaking of newlyweds—where are they?" Irene looked about her as though she half expected to see Mollie and Roy hidden behind a bush or a tree. "Not a sign of any one anywhere."

"We might go up and knock," said Stella, gingerly threading her way along the loose boards that formed a walk leading up to the door of the bungalow. "Roy probably hasn't come up from town yet and Mollie may be taking a nap."

"Mollie taking a nap!" sniffed Irene. "Who ever heard of such a thing? Mollie

and afternoon naps don't go together."

Nevertheless, no answer was returned to their knock on the door. They waited for a few seconds, then rapped again—and again. Still no answer.

Stella tried the knob of the door and found that it turned easily.

"Mollie isn't far away," she deduced. "She would never go off and leave her door wide open. Come on, let's look her up!"

They crowded into the hall, each feeling much as Goldilocks must have felt upon entering the house of the three bears. Although there was nothing bearlike or ferocious about Mollie, still there was an element of adventure in entering a person's home unannounced, especially when that person had every reason to believe that one was miles away in Deepdale.

The bungalow contained only four rooms —two of these being bedrooms—and it did not take the girls long to discover that all four of them were empty.

In the kitchen, however, they found signs of recent occupation. Something was stewing in a pot on the oil stove, something that gave off a delicious aroma and reminded the girls that they were hungry again. A dish

containing potato peelings was on the kitchen table. A towel had been thrown over the back of a chair.

"The trail gets hot," said Irene, sniffing hungrily. "With dinner boiling on the stove, it seems reasonable to believe that the cook must be somewhere in the vicinity."

"But where? That is the question," sighed Carolyn. She opened the oven door and Lota giggled.

"You didn't expect to find her in there, did you?" she asked. "Or did you?"

"Goose!" retorted Carolyn. "I was looking for cake!"

"Girls!"

They whirled about, facing the kitchen door. Mollie stood there, a pail of water swinging from each hand.

Pails and water went flying. Mollie dropped them anywhere and ran forward, arms outstretched.

"Girls! Girls!" she cried. "You old darlings! Where did you come from, and when? Or am I dreaming and you are not really here at all—just your ghosts, or something?"

"We're pretty substantial ghosts, honey," returned Stella. "And I'm afraid you will find we have pretty substantial appetites.

It's really awful, dropping down on you like this——"

"Awful? Lovely!" cried Mollie. "Bother food, anyway. If there isn't enough Irish stew—Roy's favorite dish, my dears, much, much better than chicken—why, we'll have the darling—Roy, I mean—go out and catch some fish! Oh, dear, I don't know what I'm saying! And I don't care! It's so perfectly gorgeous to see you here. Now tell me—*how* did you come?"

"On shank's mare," chuckled Meg Bronson. "All the way from Deepdale, Mollikin, and a two-days' tramp."

Mollie's eyes sparkled.

"Wonderful! A hike that *is* a hike! But now that you're here—" she cried, trying to hug them all again and finding that her arms would not go round. "Now that you're here there will be no more hiking for the Outdoor Girls for a little while. I warn you, I intend to hang on to you—hard! Now, tell me all about everything. I'm crazy to know."

She *was* crazy to know. She listened with eager eyes and parted lips while the girls retraced, for her benefit, the first part of their hike and outlined their plans for the rest of it. Watching her, the girls knew that

Mollie missed some phases of the old life, even though she was very happy in the new. Her eyes grew wistful and more than once she interrupted with, "A perfect idea!" or, "How I wish I could go with you!"

However, it was not long before the instinct of a good housewife triumphed over personal desire or regret. Mollie jumped to her feet, ran over to the stove and sniffed critically. Water was added to the mixture in "the nick of time." The guests had Mollie's word for it.

"We can't afford to burn the stew," she cried gayly, "or we might go hungry to bed. Unless Roy really would go out and catch us some fish," she added, with a chuckle. "While being a perfect dear and the best of husbands, he has one failing—he will insist upon having his dinner ready when he gets home. He's a terrible old bear when he's hungry." All this was said with an air of affectionate pride that the girls did not miss. They thought this new importance was very becoming to Mollie. She had never looked better in her life to them than she did at that moment, bending over the pot of stew and commenting tolerantly about the "bearish" tendencies of her young husband.

"She is thoroughly happy," thought Stella. "But she misses the old life, just the same." Aloud, she said: "How is he?"

"Who? Roy? Wonderful! And he's getting fat. I wish you could see him!"

"Well," said an amused masculine voice from somewhere outside, "if all your wishes were granted so easily——"

"Oh, Roy, don't fall over the pails, dear. I spilled some water."

"Looks like it! What's the idea? Trying to start a flood or something— Hello!" Roy had reached the doorway. "Well, for the love of Pete, just look who's here!"

CHAPTER XII

REUNION

Roy Anderson kissed the Outdoor Girls all around. He said he was going to, and since no one objected strenuously, he carried out his threat without much difficulty.

Then he sat down with his arm about Mollie and requested to "hear all about it."

"This is fine, you know, to see you all," he cried, his face beaming with boyish pleasure. "Hiking too, are you? Sounds like old times."

"Doesn't it?" Mollie was wistful again. "Roy, would you mind, I mean would it put you out an awful lot if I—if I just hiked along with them for a—little way?"

Roy's look of astonishment was comical. The girls giggled.

"Now listen," said the young husband, "if you think I am going to have my very new wife hiking all over the countryside——"

"Not all over," coaxed Mollie. "Just a *little* way."

"Little way or long makes no difference," Roy assured her sternly. "I say again that if you think I am going to have my wife——"

"Roy dear, are you going to put your foot down?" inquired that same wife. "Because I've often read in stories about the husband putting his foot down, but I've never seen it done. Will you do it very hard?"

"So hard it will shake the house," Roy agreed amiably. "You'd better watch out!"

"The stew!" wailed Mollie, suddenly making a dash for the stove. "I'll burn it yet. *Why* can't I remember to keep the light turned low!"

But the stew was not burned, as the hungry crowd had ample opportunity to learn later on.

With Roy's help, the girls set the table in the kitchen, which served as dining room, too. Meanwhile, they answered innumerable questions. The young newlyweds were insatiable for news.

Dinner was on the table at last. Stew, tomato salad, biscuits, strawberries and cream. To the hungry girls it bore all the aspects of a feast.

It was not until the strawberries-and-

cream stage that Roy brought up a subject that was of peculiar interest to them all—and most especially to Carolyn.

Out of a clear sky he said:

"I suppose you have all heard the story of the Fennelson robbery."

Carolyn started and turned toward Roy eagerly.

"Have they found the thief?" she cried.

Roy shook his head.

"No, they haven't, unfortunately," he replied. "Whoever it was that robbed Fennelson seems to have cleared out without leaving one respectable, life-sized clue behind him. So far it seems to be the perfect crime, if there can be such an animal."

"Well, then I don't understand what it's all about," said Mollie, urging a second dish of strawberries upon Lota. "If they haven't found the thief——"

"What I started to say was that poor Fennelson will recover," Roy explained. "It seems that he is definitely out of danger now; so that the crime is theft, not murder."

"Have they found out just what was stolen?" Carolyn asked in a low voice.

"Fennelson was a funny old codger. He never kept a complete record of his stock,

so that it was impossible for the police to check up on the loss accurately. But they say Fennelson himself never forgets an article, its price, or its origin. He will know what is missing, all right, once he gets on the job again."

"Will that be soon, do you think?" asked Carolyn.

"Probably within a few days at the most," returned Roy. "Now that he's on the mend the old boy will probably recover rapidly. A lot of people in Deepdale will be glad to see him well again and a lot more who will be glad to see the thief caught."

"If he ever is," said Carolyn. But she said it beneath her breath so that nobody heard.

Mollie noticed Carolyn's sudden gravity and preoccupation and remarked upon it.

"Why so solemn, Carolyn?" she teased. "You look as though you had lost your best friend."

"Not quite," said Carolyn. She raised eyes that were suddenly bright with tears. "But those heirlooms of mine were old friends, and if they are lost—I—I——"

"There! There!" said Stella comfortingly.

"We don't even know yet that your trinkets were among those things stolen from Mr. Fennelson's curio shop——"

Carolyn displayed a sudden flash of temper.

"That's just it!" she cried. "We don't know anything about it, and the chances are we never shall. The police? Bah! With all the force after him, pretty near, to say nothing of a dozen or so detectives, the thief should have been caught long ago."

"It does seem so," agreed Stella.

Here Mollie demanded to know the particulars of the robbery, especially as it concerned Carolyn. She and Roy were both deeply interested and showed it.

"Any day now may bring an arrest," Roy pointed out. "Then there is the probability that your heirlooms—if they really have been stolen—will be returned to you."

Carolyn nodded, not too hopefully. She had said little to the girls concerning her worry, fearing that repeated references to the Fennelson robbery and her unfortunate share in it might dim the pleasure of the hike, but her own anxiety and grief over the probable theft of her treasures never left her. It hov-

ered persistently in the background of her mind, throwing its shadow over the brightest events of the day.

"If the police department doesn't get busy pretty soon and do something," she now said desperately to Roy, "I'll go back to Deepdale and catch the thief myself!"

"With your bare hands?" queried Irene, wrinkling her nose.

"With anything," replied Carolyn grimly, "as long as I get my heirlooms back!"

After dinner they cleared away the dishes in a great hurry and went for a walk around the lake.

"It's a very little lake," Mollie apologized. "But it's pretty, and swimming at the deep end is really very good. You girls will have to prove that for yourselves to-morrow."

"Will we!" they cried, and Stella added:

"That's one thing we none of us forgot to bring along—our swimming suits.

"But we can't stay very long, Mollie," she added. "Much as we'd love to. We have to move on, you know, if we want to finish our hike in the time we've set ourselves."

"A day or two won't make any difference," Mollie coaxed. "It won't do you any harm

to rest in between the laps of your trip."

So it was arranged—by Mollie—and the Outdoor Girls settled down to two full days of solid enjoyment, the hike to be resumed on the morning of the third day.

That first night in the little cottage they went to bed "in tiers" as Meg put it.

"Well, as long as we don't go to bed in *tears,*" giggled Lota.

There were only two sleeping rooms in the cottage. Stella, Carolyn and Meg occupied the double bed in one of them. As the bed was modern and, therefore, none too broad, the three girls got but little rest.

Irene and Lota were probably more comfortable, as far as sleeping arrangements were concerned. There was an article of furniture commonly known as a "day bed" in the living room. This, when opened out, formed a fairly easeful couch.

As for the sixth member of the camping party, he was given an old coat near the front door and told to guard the house against thieves. Since the big collie was never happier than in the rôle of protector of the household, this pleased him mightily. He slept with one eye vigilantly open all night,

and roused himself frequently to growl at some unseen—and probably imaginary—prowler.

The next day Roy started off bright and early for the city.

"I'm a working man, you know," he told them, with a grin. "I've a family to support now. No days off for me!"

After the master of the house had definitely departed and the bungalow hurriedly set to rights, the girls went out to become better acquainted with the lake.

"We have a boat, of sorts," Mollie confided to them. "It's an old rowboat and it leaks, but then they all do, more or less, around here. Anyway, we have time to get from one end of the lake to the other before it quite fills with water. Then we turn it upside down and wait for it to fill up again."

The girls chuckled.

"I should think it would be convenient, under such circumstances, to have your bathing suits along," Stella said.

"We-ell," Mollie admitted, "we don't exactly go out in our evening clothes. Anyway, it's heaps of fun and lots better than nothing."

The girls agreed that it was and Irene was all for going back and donning her bathing suit.

"What's the use of walking," she argued, "when you might ride in a boat like that?"

But Mollie wanted to walk.

"We can go out in the boat this afternoon. Maybe we'll catch a few fish for dinner," she said. "But just now, I want to show you my lake."

It was a pretty lake. The girls admitted it without persuasion. The cottages that dotted its shores were inviting, too—an ideal place to spend one's summer vacation.

Mollie knew most of her neighbors and in the course of their ramble about the lake she and the girls were stopped frequently by pleasant people who liked Mollie and who became instantly and sincerely interested in the Outdoor Girls and the story of their ambitious hike.

One of them in particular, a vivacious, dark-haired young person called Mimi, invited them all to a supper and swimming party which she was arranging for the next evening.

"Now you see," said Mollie, when they had finally succeeded in disengaging themselves

from the friendly Mimi, "how lucky it is that you agreed to stay over until to-morrow. Think what you might have missed!"

"I can see there are all the makings of a wonderfully good time here for the Outdoor Girls," laughed Stella. "If we're not careful, we'll forget all about being on a hike and settle down on you. Don't make it too nice for us, Mollie, please."

They were reaching that part of the lake where most of the members of the summer colony gathered when they really wanted to swim. There the lake bottom shelved gently to a depth of seven or eight feet. There was a diving board, a water chute and, about a hundred yards from the shore, a raft.

"Just a mark to shoot at, that raft," Mollie explained. "Although sometimes we do make up a party and race to it. We have lots of fun."

"Stop it!" begged Lota. "We won't want to go home!"

"Look at that child!" cried Stella suddenly.

A small adventurous tot, not more than five years old, had climbed the ladder to the top of the water slide. Now, while the girls watched, horrified, he scrambeld over the

edge and sat upon the platform at the top, waving his fat arms and legs and crowing with glee.

At the same time, the mother, talking to another woman on the shore, looked up and saw the child's danger.

"Billy!" she cried. "Come back here! Get down this instant! Do you want to kill yourself? Get down, I say."

"Fool!" cried Stella, under her breath.

She darted toward the ladder and began to climb it, hand over hand.

CHAPTER XIII

STELLA TO THE RESCUE

"SHALL I be too late?" Stella Sibley asked herself.

She had seen the child's startled look as the mother called to him, had seen him, perched at the top of the slide, half turn and pucker up his lip in a frightened whimper.

Suppose he should lose his balance on the narrow platform before she could get to him? He might topple over the side and break his chubby little neck. Or he might catapult into the water and be drowned before help could get to him.

All these thoughts raced through Stella's mind as she scaled the ladder. Her head reached over the platform. The child was voicing his grief, pathetically frightened. But he was still there.

Stella reached out her hand for him—just a second too late.

The little one heard her there behind him. He half turned, startled—lost his balance.

With a shriek of terror he started down the steep incline.

Stella flung herself over the platform and started after him.

The baby had almost reached the water when she overtook him. She scooped him up and they took the water together. The weight of the child forced her beneath the water. But in some way she managed to hold him above the surface until she could come up, choking and sputtering and shaking the wet hair from her face like a water spaniel.

The little boy wound both chubby arms about her neck. He was too frightened to cry, but his baby lip was thrust forth pitifully and he whimpered:

"I wan' my mama! I wan' my mama!"

"All right, hang on, honey," Stella said reassuringly. "You just hang on tight and we'll have you with your mother before you can say Jack Robinson. You try it and see! Say Jack——"

"Jack," said the baby, and closed his eyes tight.

"Good! Now, slowly, you know, you've got to give me time—Robinson!"

"Rob-in-son," the baby lips dragged out.

Stella touched the bottom of the lake. She

got to her feet triumphantly, the child in her arms.

"What did I tell you!" she cried. "And here's your mother waiting for you and everything."

The little boy patted her cheek.

"You nice gayle," he said approvingly. "I like you!"

"Bless your heart," said Stella, hugging him. "And I love you, you bad little darling. Now Mother wants you—and I can't say I blame her."

The grateful mother showered thanks upon Stella, the while she wept over her recovered son.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said over and over again.

"Mama," said the child, seized with an entrancing idea, "let her come over and live wiv us. She's very nice gayle."

This broke the tension, and every one began to laugh—even the mother, through her tears.

Although the "nice gayle" could not promise to come and live at the house of her new and fervent admirer, she did promise to go to see the small chap before starting again on her hike. Then, dreading more thanks,

she extricated herself from the group and went off with her comrades.

"It was wonderfully done, Stella," Mollie said quietly, the light of admiration on her expressive face.

Stella began to shiver, and Mollie, alarmed, took instant command of the situation.

"Back to the bungalow for you!" she said. "Dry clothes and a hot drink before you get pneumonia or something worse!"

"Pneumonia!" scoffed Stella. "It couldn't be done, darling—not at this time of year." Nevertheless she submitted to the change of clothes and a hot drink. She was of no mind to let sickness interfere with the progress of their glorious hike.

After luncheon they donned bathing suits and went out in the leaky rowboat to try their luck at angling. While their luck was in no way phenomenal, they did manage to catch enough fish for dinner.

And what appetites they had!

When, dinner some time in the background, they finally turned in for a well-earned night's rest they did not care whether they slept three or six in a bed. They merely wanted to sleep.

Morning found the hikers refreshed and

eager for more of Mollie's free-and-easy hospitality.

All during the hours of the morning they frolicked in the water. In the afternoon they went for a short hike through the woods, for Mollie was eager to show them the pretty country near the lake.

That hike reminded the girls vividly of their last encounter with the gypsies. When Carolyn spoke of this, Mollie looked grave.

"I don't like the thought of that horrid old woman following you about," she said. "I never did trust gypsies, anyway—a vagabond crew. Of course," she added, whistling to Hesper, who bounded on ahead of them, "the collie is a great protection. I'll feel safer about you as long as he is along."

"That reminds me," said Stella quickly. "We were going to ask a favor of you, Mollie dear. *Would* you mind shipping Hesper back to Deepdale for us?"

"Ship him back!" Mollie repeated, wondering. "Then you don't intend to take him on with you?"

Stella explained more fully about the incident at the Draketown Inn, the dead chickens and the broken screen.

"You see, a dog is rather a nuisance on

the sort of hike we have planned," she added. "Without him we can get a night's lodging almost anywhere. But there are a lot of people who object to boarding dogs, you know."

Mollie looked thoughtful.

"Of course I'll take care of him. I'll be glad to," she assured them. "Roy often rides into town in one of our neighbor's cars and he could probably take Hesper with him. But—I hate to have you go on all alone."

"We're not alone," laughed Stella. "We're five strong Outdoor Girls together. I'd like to know what protection we need besides that!"

Molly smiled reluctantly.

"I know," she admitted. "That's the way I always felt in the good old days. Still, I would be easier in my mind if you'd take the dog along."

The girls promised to think it over.

"We'll have until to-morrow morning to decide, anyway," Stella pointed out. "But I really think we have seen the last of the gypsies. And, counting them out, I don't see what we have to be afraid of."

However, none of the girls was quite certain that the gypsies could be counted out of

future calculations. Stella herself was by no means sure of it, and Mollie was extremely dubious.

"I'll do as you say," Mollie repeated. "But I'd feel much safer about you if you would take Hesper along."

There they let the matter drop. Time enough to settle the question the next morning. Meantime, there was a party in progress that must not be spoiled by mention of Hulah, the gypsy.

On the way back to the bungalow the conversation turned naturally to the subject of what to wear.

"Although we haven't much choice in the matter," laughed Lota. "What we have on our backs and our bathing suits comprise our entire outfit."

"Bathing suits are all you will need tonight, seeing it is a swimming party," Mollie said. "They are good fun, too," she added. "We take turns giving them, and this just happens to be Mimi's turn."

A few hours later found the young folks well embarked on their party. Roy came home early, eager for the fun. About six o'clock the "crowd"—there were about twenty of the young people—began to assem-

ble before Mimi's bungalow. When all had arrived they pushed off in the various nondescript craft collected by the colony for the camp site on the opposite side of the lake where they were to cook and eat dinner.

In a snug little cove were found two or three tumble-down benches and some soap boxes that could easily be transformed into seats. There was a long table of rough boards, knocked together by the young men of the colony and exceedingly convenient when the meal was served.

And that meal! How delicious it was. A fireplace of stones piled one on another with a large grating stretched over the top cooked "wienies" and potatoes and eggs to the queen's taste.

When the solid part of the repast had been prepared, several large—and battered—coffee pots were put on the grating with a resultant pungent aroma that vied with the scent of violets and trailing arbutus.

There was fish, too, fish caught that day and broiled over the flames, fish with a flavor that fish had never had before!

After supper the picnickers made a big campfire and sat about it, telling stories and singing songs, until darkness fell and the

stars came out and the moon began to show above the horizon. Then they dashed down into the water and swam and played games and splashed about among myriad bright points of light that were the reflected stars.

"Heavenly!" cried Carolyn once, when she splashed close to Meg and Lota. "I'd like to play around like this forever."

"I don't know about that," giggled Lota. "We might turn into fish—and then where would we be?"

They went home at last, tired, but utterly content.

"If to-night is a sample of what you have here, Mollie," Irene said, "I don't blame you for loving it. A wonderful place and a great crowd of people."

"And to-morrow you are going to leave us!" wailed Mollie reproachfully. "And I wish—I really almost do wish—that I were going with—" She paused and glanced uncertainly at Roy, striding along beside her in the moonlight. He turned and grinned at her.

"Do you want me to put my foot down again, young woman?" he inquired sternly.

"No," said Mollie, with a crooked little smile. "Still—it would be nice!"

They had almost reached the Anderson bungalow when Hesper—he had been one of the happiest and most popular members of the party—paused suddenly and stood at rigid attention, muzzle pointed toward the woods. As the young folks came up to him they heard him growl softly, deep down in his throat.

"Wonder what he sees?" With a hand on the dog's head Roy peered into the deep shadows. Nothing there was visible to his eyes. He heard no suspicious sound, not even the cracking of a twig.

"Oh, he's always seeing things," said Irene. She called the dog to her with an impatient whistle. He came grudgingly step by step, with frequent glances backward. Even when they were within the bungalow with the door closed and locked the dog continued to growl and pace about uneasily. Once he stopped at the door and scratched at the crack as though trying to open it.

Although her companions accepted Irene's explanation and resolutely refused to attach any importance to this odd conduct, they could not help but ask themselves the question:

"Who—or what—did Hesper think he

saw out there in the shadows of the woods?"

Carolyn was the last to fall asleep, and in her sleep she dreamed. Two men, swarthy, sinister, crept up upon a third. In a dim light that seemed to come from some window high up in the wall—a cellar window, perhaps—Carolyn thought she recognized the third man as Mr. Fennelson of the Fennelson Curio Shop. One of the swarthy men, creeping up so stealthily raised a hand to strike—

Carolyn screamed and woke with a start to find herself staring, wide-eyed, into the darkness. She could still hear Hesper sniffing and growling at the closed front door.

CHAPTER XIV

CAUGHT IN THE RAIN

The next morning Mollie Anderson tried again to persuade the Outdoor Girls to take Hesper with them for the remainder of their hike. But the sun shone brightly, the girls felt rested and absolutely fearless. Also the unfortunate episode of the Draketown Inn was still fresh in their minds.

"We'd better not, Mollie," Stella said. "We don't know exactly where we shall sleep to-night or to-morrow night. Most likely we shall have to put up at some hotel or farm-house again, and at those places Hesper is bound to be unpopular."

Mollie smiled and finally capitulated.

"Have it your own way," she said. "We'll see that he gets safely back to Deepdale, anyway. But I imagine he will have something to say about the matter," she added ruefully. "Think of his disappointment when he finds that you actually intend to go without him."

"Tie him in the woodshed or something,"

Irene suggested. "Only, you'd better tie him with a chain. Nothing else is strong enough."

The hikers really felt sorry to desert the collie. It savored of treachery. In fact, if it had not been for Stella's very excellent reasoning, it is possible that, even at that last moment, they might have reversed the decision and decided to take him along with them after all.

They shut him in the cellar—so-called, a space under the kitchen enclosed by lattice work—and went off to the accompaniment of doleful barks and impatient scratchings on the cellar door.

"I feel like a wretch," said Irene miserably. "Hesper will never trust me again after this."

"I only hope he doesn't tear the door down before I can get back," said Mollie ruefully. "Sure you won't change your mind, girls, and take him along?"

"Sure," they replied, but with no great conviction. They were all going to miss the frolicsome collie more than they liked to think about.

Mollie went with them as far as the path that turned out at right angles to the lake.

"I'd like to go on farther with you," she told them, stopping there. "But I don't dare. I'm afraid I'd keep right along with you until I came to the seashore. So run along before my resolution weakens!"

"We've had a marvelous time," they told her.

"And it's only grim determination that sends us on our way so soon," Irene chuckled. "We'd like to have stayed for at least one more swimming party!"

The hikers left their hostess standing there, looking after them and wishing rebelliously—despite a husband that "put his foot down"—that she were going with them.

When the trees at last hid her from view the Outdoor Girls sighed regretfully and turned their attention once more to their immediate plans.

Mollie had put up a lunch for them, so there was no need to worry about that.

"We'll tear off a good stretch this morning," Stella said. "Then late this afternoon we will stop at the first likely looking place we see."

They had figured that it would take about three days to reach the seaside bungalow of Amy and Grace. But this meant that their

progress must be steady and reasonably swift. They would have little time to linger on the way.

Lunch found them several miles from Mollie's and, as usual, ravenously hungry. They devoured sandwiches and fruit and cake, finishing with milk and hot coffee.

It was when they were clearing away lunch that Meg discovered the ominous bank of storm cloud.

"Hanging low in the east," she said. "That means rain, and plenty of it, or I'm no prophet."

The others joined her in anxious inspection of the storm signal.

"Looks like it," Stella agreed. "There's a wind rising, too."

"We'd better run and find some sort of shelter before the storm finds *us*," Irene suggested.

"Bright child!" said Meg dryly. "The sooner the better, I'd say."

The girls hurriedly packed their things, tightened their knicker belts, and started forth to out-race the storm. The rising wind moaned through the trees at the roadside and swept out-flung limbs and saplings earth-

ward. It swept other things, too, including a great cloud of dust that got into the girls' lungs, choking them and making their eyes sting painfully.

It seemed for a long time as though they were to find no shelter of any kind. And always the storm came nearer. The cloud bank rolled up from the east, obscuring the sun. Now and then the grey mass was shot through by a faint flash of lightning. Thunder rumbled dismally in the distance.

"Bother!" said Carolyn. "And when we started there wasn't a cloud in the sky!"

"We can't expect to run in such luck forever," said Meg philosophically. "It will rain occasionally, you know, even though we're on a hike."

A clap of thunder louder and sharper than the rest startled the hikers and sent them scurrying along the road at a still faster pace.

"Keep your eyes open for a barn or something," Stella instructed. "Even a woodshed would help, provided it was watertight."

A sudden burst of wind, followed by a swish of rain, warned them that the storm was upon them.

"Here it comes!" cried Carolyn.

The rain came faster. In another moment the deluge would be upon them.

"We'll be soaked through!" cried Lota. "Why didn't we think to bring slickers along with us!"

"A pretty nuisance they'd have been in clear weather," grumbled Meg. "My, what thunder!"

The heavens crackled and roared overhead. The clouds were torn wide open, deluging rain upon the parched earth.

Stella, running on ahead, called to the girls.

"There's a building over here!" she cried. "I think it's a barn. Hurry!"

They raced through the sheeting rain toward the outlined shape of a building. Stella and Irene were there before the others, feeling blindly for a door.

Irene found the door with such suddenness that she was flung forward on to the floor of the barn. She picked herself up and scrambled out of the way of the other girls.

"There are all sorts of ways of entering a place," she giggled. "Mine was effective —if uncomfortable!"

The last one in, who happened to be Caro-

lyn, shut the door, found a bolt, and pulled it.

"There!" she said, with satisfaction. "Now, rain, try to get in if you can!"

Though they had been exposed to the deluge for only a few moments, the girls found themselves unpleasantly wet. Their spirits had sunk several degrees, also.

They looked about their new quarters without enthusiasm. They were in what had probably once been used as a barn but was now a sort of storage house for worn-out carriages, harness, farm implements, and so forth. The place was roomy enough and the roof was evidently watertight, but it smelled dead and musty, as all such places must.

Meg went over and examined an old, broken-down phaeton. One wheel was off, the cushions were frayed and covered with dust.

"We might camp out here for the night, girls, and not be too uncomfortable," she observed.

"Heaven forbid!" cried Irene. "I'd not sleep a wink in this horrid place."

"We won't have to," Stella said soothingly. "Where there's a barn and farm implements, there is almost certain to be a farmhouse.

If this rain keeps up—which I don't think it will—we can probably get them to take us in at the house for the night."

"Ouch! Listen to the thunder!" Carolyn clapped both hands over her ears and screwed her eyes tight shut. "This is a terrible storm!"

Meg went over to one of the windows in the barn, rubbed away a few of the cobwebs that covered it, and stared out at the gloomy prospect.

"Raining cats and dogs," she announced. "It's lucky for us we found this place, girls. We'd be nothing but damp rags by now."

"Listen!" cried Stella, holding up her hand. "I heard something! There's some one outside the door."

A sharp double knock from without proved the truth of her assertion.

"Open the door!" cried a man's harsh voice. "Open it before we bust it in!"

The Outdoor Girls did not like the voice. Neither did they like the threat. They stood for a moment, debating what to do.

CHAPTER XV

CHICKEN THIEVES

THE door rattled and shook beneath the pressure of a heavy hand.

"Better open it, Stella," Meg advised. "He *could* break it down you know."

"Probably it's only the farmer, anyway," Lota suggested. "And if we keep the door locked against him, he'll think we are suspicious characters."

The door rattled and shook again.

"Are you goin' to open that door?" demanded a wrathful voice.

Stella slid back the bolt and jumped away.

The door opened with such violence that the two men behind it almost fell into the opening.

The girls regarded the men half curiously, half fearfully. They were reassured to find that one was quite old. White hair straggled from beneath a tattered straw hat, a streaked grey beard hung down over a venerable chest.

The second man was young, his son, probably, and powerful. Outside, in the rain, the girls saw another shadowy shape in slicker and storm helmet, a second son, possibly.

The old man turned little fierce eyes upon them. Meg was reminded of a weasel.

"What you think you're doin' here?" demanded the old man. "Stealin' my chickens, eh? Well, I'll learn you!"

Here was something new! The old idiot actually thought they were chicken thieves! The girls merely stared at him. Their silence appeared to irritate the irate farmer.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"What?" the girls asked in chorus, wanting to giggle and not quite daring to.

"My chickens!" The old man waxed ferocious. "I suppose you're goin' to tell me you ain't had nothin' to do with them missin' fowls——"

"You're exactly right!" cried Stella, suddenly angry. "What would we want your chickens for? We're not thieves!"

"You ain't, ain't you!" retorted the old man, evidently unconvinced. "Then mebbe you can tell me what you mean by bustin' into my barn and then lockin' the door against me."

"We 'busted into your barn' because it was raining and we didn't want to get wet," said Meg, with spirit. "As to the door, we didn't lock it against *you,* but against the wind!"

The young man plucked at the old one's sleeve.

"They don't look like chicken thieves, pop," he said slowly. "Maybe you're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"I am, am I!" retorted the irate farmer, scowling upon his son. "You always was a fool for not suspectin' people, Eben. Reckon you'd give these young scamps a medal for bustin' into our barn and stealin' of our chickens——"

"Pop!" called the shadowy figure from outside the barn. "There's some one down at the chicken coop now. Better come along —an' bring your gun." The speaker dashed off through the rain.

As for the farmer, he was quite evidently pulled two ways at once. He was reluctant to leave the girls on the chance that they might escape. At the same time, who was that other thief seen prowling around his chicken yard?

He compromised.

"You stay here, Eben," he ordered, scowling at the young fellow. "An' you keep your gun handy. If they escape, I'll put it up to you, so I will!"

With that he was gone and the girls were left to face the more lenient of their enemies. The boy grinned at them.

"The ole man's all het up," he said, in his gentle drawl. "He's been missin' chickens lately——"

"So we gathered," murmured Irene.

"An' this mornin' didn't his favorite hen up and disappear!" continued the youth. "That hen, she was a good one. Always laid eggs with double yolks, she did. The ole man he went red-headed when he found she'd busted loose."

"You don't think we stole your old chickens, do you?" asked Carolyn Cooper indignantly.

"No, ma'am," said the boy, his grin growing wider. "You don't noways look like chicken thieves to me and I'm what's known as a reader of character in these parts."

The girls liked him; they liked him at once and genuinely.

"Then who do you suppose that man is down by the chicken yard?" Lota demanded.

"The real thief, most likely," the boy returned. "And when he's caught and trussed up proper, you will be free to go on your way unmolested, as they say in books."

The girls stared at the solid sheet of rain outside the open door.

"It's hard to say whether that is a promise or a threat," said Meg ruefully. "I think we'd prefer to stay here for a little while, thank you; that is, if we don't have to stay as prisoners."

There was a sudden commotion outside. Two or three gaudily clad figures flashed past the door.

"Gypsies!" cried Stella, and pushed past the young fellow to stare out into the rain.

One of the gypsies turned at her cry and stared at her. He had an ugly face, his scowl was something to be remembered and shuddered at.

This all happened almost instantaneously. The next moment the gypsies had disappeared among the trees.

The young farmer cried out, shouldered his shotgun and pushed past Stella into the rain.

"More thieves!" he cried.

He disappeared among the trees on the

trail of the gypsies, leaving the girls unguarded.

"Now is our chance to escape," giggled Carolyn nervously. "All the shotguns have been temporarily removed."

"We'll stay right where we are," returned Stella decidedly. "I'd like to see us run from that horrid old man. Then he *would* think we had stolen his silly chickens."

"And we'd be shut up in the county jail and Roy and Mollie would have to come and bail us out," added Lota. "One of the thrills of hiking!"

"A thrill I could very well do without," retorted Meg.

In a remarkably short time the young man called Eben returned. With him was one of the gypsies. Stella recognized him as the man with the ugly face, the one who had scowled at her.

"I got him, but the other two disappeared," said the young farmer. He seemed considerably crestfallen over the fact that he had not bagged all three of the scoundrels. "Anyway, we can put this fellow in jail all right," he added, displaying a bag in which reposed two squawking fowls. "Caught him with the goods."

"How nice!" said Carolyn. "Now your father won't be angry with us any more."

The gypsy turned upon her such a venomous glare that Carolyn shrank back, startled.

"You tell, eh?" cried the black-browed scoundrel. "Well, then, the tribe will make you pay!"

The young farmer clapped a hand on the fellow's shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Shut up!" he commanded. "We don't want none of your ugly talk. Nobody's to blame for what's happenin' to you but yourself! Forward march!"

At the point of the gun, but not without a venomous parting glance over his shoulder, the gypsy was forced in the direction of the farmhouse and the ultimate judgment of the law.

The girls crowded to the door, saw Eben and his prisoner meet the old man down near the chicken yard. There was a second prisoner, also a gypsy; probably the same that the farmer's second son had discovered in the act of entering the chicken coop.

"They've got them both," Lota observed, rather unnecessarily. "I guess that lets us out. I hardly think the old man will put us in the same class as the gypsies."

It was at this juncture that Carolyn made a discovery.

"It's stopped raining, girls. I vote that we get on our way."

"By all means," seconded Stella.

"If the farmer will let us!" added Meg. "He may still want to lock us up, for all we know."

But the farmer evidently had no such intention. He had caught his chicken thieves red-handed and so the first suspects were exonerated.

He saw the girls as they left the barn and turned off into the main road. He waved his hand to them in quite a friendly way.

"Good luck," he called after them. "Sorry to have misjudged you!"

One of the prisoners turned to stare after them. It seemed to Stella that she could see the gypsy's ugly scowling face long after a bend in the road hid it from her view.

CHAPTER XVI

HULAH AGAIN

"So THAT's that!" said Meg Bronson. "The real thieves are apprehended. The reputation of the Outdoor Girls comes clean. We can end the story with, 'And they all lived happily ever after.'"

"I'm not so sure of that," said Stella Sibley. "Did you see how that gypsy looked at us?"

Carolyn nodded.

"He had an awful face," she said, and added: "I wonder if he belongs to Hulah's band."

"Probably they both do," observed Lota. "And that means that the gypsies are right on our trail."

"Or we are on theirs," came from Stella. "I was hoping we had got rid of them," she added, with a worried frown. "Perhaps, after all, Mollie was right and we should have brought Hesper along."

"He would be a comfort right now," Carolyn admitted.

Perhaps it was fortunate, under the circumstances, that the girls were not permitted to look in upon a conference that was taking place at that moment scarcely a mile away from them.

A wrinkled old crone sat enthroned in the back of a wagon, her feet upon an overturned wooden box. About her were gathered members of the gypsy band of which Hulah was the undisputed ruler.

Dark looks were on all the faces. One of the gypsies, a lad not more than ten or eleven years old, came forward at the crook of the old crone's finger.

"You saw this, Garcio?" asked Hulah.

"With my own eyes," returned the boy. "I was hidden among the trees so that they did not see me. But I saw these girls who were dressed like men."

"What happened then?" questioned Hulah, scowling. "Tell the story in your own words, Garcio."

"The big Gringo with the great shoulders and mighty fist seize Murillo and the bag of chickens," the lad continued. "The Gringo

has a gun so Murillo dares not refuse to go with him. Dario and Benedito get away."

Hulah turned to two stalwart gypsies who stood glowering near by.

"Is that the truth?" she demanded. "You did nothing to help Murillo?"

The gypsy named Dario shrugged.

"We had no gun," he said. "The Gringo was armed."

"Pedro was also caught," Benedito added. "Two Gringos ran up, one old, one young. Both carried guns. Pedro was not quick enough to escape."

"Murillo, Pedro," muttered the old crone, frowning. "Two of the best men of the tribe."

She sat silent for a moment, mouthing and mumbling beneath her breath. Then she turned once more to the young lad who stood quietly beside her, awaiting her pleasure.

"And you, Garcio," said Hulah, looking up. "What more have you to tell?"

"When I saw that Murillo could not escape," the lad continued, "I followed him and the armed Gringo."

"It is more than you did, Benedito, or you, Dario," grumbled Hulah, turning her pierc-

ing gaze upon the two tall gypsies. "You ran, like cowards. And Pedro, Murillo, who are brave, must suffer."

The men turned sullen. They could not meet the accusing look of the old crone. Dario shrugged and muttered something under his breath. Benedito said nothing.

Again Hulah turned to the lad.

"Continue," she bade him, frowning. "You followed Murillo and the Gringo back to the Gringo's farm. What then?"

"These girls are in the doorway of the barn," Garcio continued. "The Gringo say, 'I have him!' and one of these girls, she says, 'That is nice!' "

"Ah!" The old crone looked up. Her piercing eyes bored through the lad, her crooked fingers were like claws. "And you, Garcio, can you tell what manner of girls these are, their eyes, their hair, the way they walk and talk?"

The lad frowned.

"I saw them but briefly, Hulah," he said. "But I will do my best."

His description appeared to satisfy the aged crone. She nodded once or twice, her brow grew black.

"It is the same," she muttered. "Once

they refuse to let me look into the future; I am ordered from their garden like a dog, a pig. Then again, when I ask for a bite to eat I am set upon by a huge beast that barks like a dog, but has the fangs of a wolf. And now—" she was working herself into a rage that was hideous to behold. Her hands were flung above her head, fingers clawing at the air, wrinkled lips writhed back from toothless gums. "Now," she shrieked, "they have betrayed Murillo and Pedro into the clutches of the law. They will pay for that! I, Hulah, will make them pay!"

Meanwhile, the girls went on their way, serenely unconscious of the scene that was enacted not more than a mile away from them. Perhaps it was as well for their peace of mind during the two days that directly followed the episode of the chicken thieves that they had not seen the gypsy Hulah at the height of her fury nor heard her threat of revenge.

As a matter of fact, the remainder of the hike to the cottage of Grace and Amy and their respective husbands was uneventful and pleasant in the extreme. The roads were good, the weather perfect.

Two nights were spent at farmhouses that

they passed along the road, the third found them quartering at a seaside hotel that was the last word in comfort.

"We are being spoiled by luxury," Meg observed.

It was the morning of the fourth day after leaving Mollie. The girls were gathered on the veranda of the hotel, enjoying the salt tang of the ocean breeze. They had breakfasted heartily and had every reason to believe that before lunch time they would find themselves at the bungalow of their friends. It was little wonder that they were at peace with their world!

"We can take our time to-day," Stella said lazily. "Just dawdle along if we like. The hard part of our hike is behind us and now we can look forward with an easy conscience to a day or two of rest and relaxation."

"Wonder what Grace and Amy will say when we drop down on them," mused Carolyn.

"The best way to find that out, is to drop," laughed Irene. "Come on, let's get going."

They marched along merrily. They found, as often happens, that when they could "dawdle" they had no desire to do so. The

salt air was life giving. They felt in the best of condition mentally and physically.

Once out of the woods they had seemed to leave the gypsies and their fear of them definitely behind. They felt happier and more care-free than they had at any time since the start of their hike.

They figured that the bungalow at which Grace and Amy and their husbands were summering was about three miles farther on along the beach.

After the distance they had already covered in their journey from Deepdale, coming by the roundabout way they had chosen, that three miles seemed not much longer than three blocks to the girls. They covered them blithely, reaching their destination about half-past ten o'clock.

"I bet that Amy and Grace aren't up yet," conjectured Meg. "They won't expect such early morning callers."

"There's Grace now!" cried Stella suddenly. "And Amy's with her. Looks as if they'd just been in for a dip."

The Outdoor Girls ran down the beach to greet two dripping figures attired in natty bathing suits and rakish, bright-colored caps.

Grace and Amy paused, gasped, and then rushed forward with outstretched arms.

"It's our Outdoor Girls!" Grace exclaimed. "I'm not dreaming, am I, Amy? Pinch me!"

But Amy did not heed the request. She was having her own difficulty making herself believe that she was not seeing visions.

"Let us get into our bathing suits and join you out here," Stella begged, forestalling the inevitable flood of questions. "Then we'll tell you all about everything, twice over, if you like."

"You may do anything you like so long as you don't fade out and disappear like those things in the movies!" cried Grace. "I can't believe yet that you are really here! Can you, Amy?"

"Not quite," replied Amy. "But I have a feeling that I'm going to get used to the lovely fact in a minute or two. Come on up to the house, you bunch of surprises! We are not being a bit hospitable."

Half an hour later, two happy conspirators hatched a pleasant plan. They were all back on the beach, the Outdoor Girls in bathing suits now, stretched out in luxurious laziness beneath the noonday sun.

"We'll write the boys to-day," Amy decided, poking with her finger in the hot sand.

"A wire would be better," suggested Grace.

"It would," Amy accepted the suggestion. "We'll send a wire to Clem and Hal and Dick and invite them up here for a day or two," and that afternoon three telegrams were actually despatched to Deepdale.

The following morning one answering telegram was received. It was a collective telegram, showing that the boys had gone into conference. It read something like this:

Will arrive high noon to-morrow Stop Have ordered special trains Stop Counting the minutes.

HAL DICK CLEM

The girls chuckled a good deal over that signature.

"They seem to have gotten together on it pretty well," laughed Grace. "I think that, although we *are* old married women, Amy, we are going to enjoy seeing those boys again!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BOYS ARRIVE

WILL FORD and Frank Haley joked a good deal that evening about the expected arrival of Clem Field, Dick Blossom and Hal Duckworth.

"I don't know about this," Frank said. "Three good looking young chaps around all day while we have to slave away in the office. How about it, Will? Don't you think we ought to take a few days off?"

"Oh, I wish you could!" cried Amy. "Boys, don't you think it might be arranged?"

"Afraid not," returned Will, with the especial smile he always kept for Amy. "The office couldn't get along without me, dear. And as for Frank—well, of course, he runs the whole show!"

"Thanks for the compliment," laughed Frank. "That would certainly be news to the boss!"

The next morning the young husbands re-

opened the subject, teasing Grace and Amy and warning them to behave with discretion during the necessary absence of their "better halves."

"You needn't worry," scoffed Grace. "Our guests will be too taken up with the single Outdoor Girls to spare us poor married ones a glance!"

Directly after breakfast the girls went in for their morning dip. They played around on the sand for a while but went up to the bungalow early so as to have ample time to get dressed and go down to the station to meet the boys.

Will and Frank had picked up an old, rather disreputable-looking car. "Just to run around in up here," Grace explained. "We have loads of fun with it because we don't have to take care of it. Sometimes it even stands out overnight if the boys get lazy and don't want to walk back from the garage in town, and it never seems to be any the worse for its exposure. That's the beauty of it."

Now they all got into the ancient vehicle and drove off to meet the boys. There were three in front—Amy drove—and four in the tonneau.

"The boys can hang on behind or something," giggled Irene.

"They'll know what to do," Grace laughed. "Leave it to them."

The train was late, and while they were waiting Amy and Grace did a bit of shopping for luncheon.

"With three boys to feed—" began Amy.

"Not to mention five, ever-hungry girls," interrupted Stella.

"It looks as if we'd better lay in a real stock of provisions!"

The boys arrived, late but cheerful.

"You gave us a doubly pleasant jolt, sending that telegram," Hal assured the married ones. "First of all, we were mighty glad to get this chance to come out here and see you. And then, we learned what we very much wanted to know; namely, that the Outdoor Girls had accomplished this much of their hike in safety."

"You needn't laugh!" Carolyn told him. "If you ask me, I think we have done very well."

"You have," replied Clem. "Only we are glad that you have decided to lay off for a day or two, anyway, so that we shall have a chance for one good party with you."

"All right, here we are," sang Dick Blossom from the car. "Let's go."

They had planned a picnic for that afternoon, so when the crowd reached the house the girls busied themselves at once preparing lunch while the boys strolled down to the beach.

They were soon ready and started out happily for a long, lazy afternoon. They sauntered along the shore for a considerable distance, the boys carrying the lunch and asking plaintively every few yards when they were going to eat.

The girls yielded to entreaty after a while. They found a smooth, inviting strip of beach and sat down to enjoy the hastily prepared lunch.

Dick, as usual, afforded great merriment by constantly mixing Meg with Lota and Lota with Meg.

"I *can't* tell which is which," he admitted helplessly. "Two people have no business to look so much alike."

"We just do it to be mean," drawled Meg.

"Well," said poor Dick, "*that* sounded like Meg, but I never can be sure."

"It was Meg," said Lota, with spirit. "And I'll just tell you, Dick Blossom, if you

begin to blame everything Meg says on me, there's going to be trouble."

"I didn't! I was just guessing," was Dick's defense of himself. "Now I am in Dutch! And, anyway, I guessed Meg first, didn't I?"

The worst of it was that, instead of feeling sympathy for him, they all laughed, whereas Dick felt that it was not at all a laughing matter.

Meanwhile, Hal and Carolyn had drawn a little apart from the others. Hal was telling the girl how good it was to see her again and how much he had missed her in Deepdale.

"I've been lonely," he said, with a reproachful look. "I think it was a mean trick to go off like this and leave me at home to twiddle my thumbs and bite my nails and otherwise get into mischief."

"Have you been getting into mischief?" Carolyn asked, sifting sand through her fingers.

"Well, I don't know that you could rightly call it that. But I've been getting into the midst of a pretty unpleasant mess, just the same."

"Why, Hal!" Carolyn sat up and stared at him in alarm. "What do you mean? What kind of a mess?"

Hal hesitated. By his frown one might have guessed that he was sorry he had spoken so impulsively.

"What kind of a mess?" Carolyn repeated.

"Oh, nothing much," he replied evasively. "I'm not ready to talk yet, anyway, Carol."

"Well, what a provoking person you are!" cried Carolyn. She hardly knew whether to be put out or amused. "Here you get my curiosity all stirred up and have me all ready to sympathize with you, and then you calmly inform me that you are not ready to talk yet. Who asked you to talk, in the first place, I'd like to know?"

"An idiot named Hal Duckworth," said Hal ruefully.

Carolyn raised her hands in a gesture of impotence and dropped back on the sand.

"You're funny!" she sighed.

Hal put his own hand over hers. He spoke earnestly.

"Listen, Carol," he said. "I'm trying out a new line of work. I can't tell you any-

thing about it just now. I'm pledged not to talk. But later on I'll explain the mystery, if you'll let me."

"Why, of course," said Carolyn quickly. "It's all right, Hal. Only I can't pretend not to be curious—about the new work you know."

When Hal made no answer but looked thoughtful, Carolyn added:

"I suppose you haven't—haven't heard anything more about Fennelson and my heirlooms?" she questioned.

Hal hesitated before answering. Carolyn was quick to jump to the inevitable conclusion. She seized Hal's arm and shook it urgently.

"You have heard!" she cried. "Quick, Hal—tell me!"

"Why, I've nothing much to tell," replied Hal uncomfortably. "Only that Fennelson has recovered his wits——"

"Yes! Roy told us!"

"And has been able to go over his stock with the police."

Carolyn did not want to ask the question, but she knew that she must.

"My mother's jewelry," she murmured. "Was that among the stolen things, Hal?"

"I'm afraid so," answered the lad, again covering her hand with his. "Not all of it, Carol, but some."

"Oh!" cried Carolyn. "And we'll never get it back—never! Somehow, I feel sure of that!"

Hal gave her an odd look.

"I wouldn't be so sure, if I were you," he said slowly.

"What do you mean by that, Hal?" asked Carolyn, turning to him eagerly. "You sound as though you had found out something—something definite about the thieves and my heirlooms! Have you?"

Hal hesitated a moment, then met her look frankly.

"I haven't liked to say much, Carol," he explained, "for fear of rousing hopes that may not be justified. But—well, I've stumbled upon a clue or two that may be useful in running down the thieves."

Carolyn's eyes gleamed.

"Tell me!" she commanded softly.

"I've stumbled upon one or two clues that seem, in my humble opinion, at least, to lead to the thieves," Hal repeated. "Do you remember that brooch Stella found near her summerhouse shortly after the gypsy for-

tune tellers had visited the place?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, I do," said Carolyn promptly. "I've wondered about that quite a bit."

"Well," said Hal, with pardonable pride, "that brooch furnishes a clue; in fact, the most important clue that I have."

Carolyn rose to her knees, dusted the sand from her hands.

"Then you know who the thief is!" she cried.

"Not yet," replied Hal. "But soon—I hope!"

This much the young amateur detective would say, but no more. However, Carolyn was confident that Hal would do eventually whatever he set out to do. For the first time she was hopeful that her heirlooms would be recovered.

After lunch the picnickers started again along the beach. A freshening breeze made them feel adventurous. After a while a group of them wandered off into a grove of trees that grew close to the beach.

Finally Stella, who was one of the group, flung herself upon the ground rebelliously and refused to stir another step.

"I'm tired," she told her companions. "If

you people intend to go on walking all day, far be it from me to interfere with your laudable ambition. But me, I'm going to sit down and rest. I may," with a laugh, "even take a little nap before you get back."

She must have fallen into a doze, at that; for it was some time later that she sat up suddenly, rubbed her eyes, and stared about her in a bewildered fashion.

She had dreamed that some one had come softly from among the trees to stand before her. She rubbed her eyes a little harder. There was some one!

"Who are you?" she cried. "What do you want?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GYPSY LAD

It was a boy who had come softly from the grove of trees to stand above Stella Sibley and whose concentrated stare had awakened her from sleep.

He was a young lad, not more than ten or eleven years old, and he was clad in tattered, dirty garments.

Only a boy! Stella laughed at her first impulse of alarm. There was surely nothing disquieting about this lad with the soft brown eyes and the rags that served as clothes. She regarded him with growing interest.

"What do you want?" she asked kindly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I have come to fetch you. I have run all the way," said the strange boy. "There is trouble. Will you come with me?"

"What kind of trouble?" demanded Stella. "What has happened?"

"One of your friends fell from a rock in the woods," said the lad, his soft, brown eyes

intent upon the girl's face. "She send me for you. She say, come quick!"

Stella jumped to her feet, thoroughly alarmed.

"One of the girls, you say?" she cried. "Is she hurt?"

"I fear so," said the lad. "She cannot walk."

"Well, lead the way—and hurry! Here I stand asking questions when—oh hurry!"

Nothing loath, the lad turned and led the way into the woods.

For some distance Stella followed him. Suddenly she caught her foot in a twisted root and cried out.

The boy turned, saw that she had stopped and was looking about her uneasily. His dark eyes flashed.

"Hurry!" he cried. "I tell you, your friend needs help."

"I have hurt my foot," said Stella coldly. "You will have to wait a minute."

The boy evidently did not want to wait. He became impatient, desperately eager for her to move on.

His manner roused Stella's dormant suspicions. Why should the lad be so anxious over the welfare of a mere stranger? she

asked herself. He might, out of kindness of heart, have been moved to seek help for the injured girl. But why come to her, Stella? And what was a lad of his age doing alone in the woods, anyway?

Asking herself these questions, she moved on more and more slowly after the boy, who repeatedly stopped to urge her on impatiently.

Finally she called to him:

"How far away is this girl? Where are the rocks you speak of?"

"It is still a distance away,'" the boy responded impatiently. "Hurry, or you may be too late!"

Suddenly Stella remembered. She knew now why the lad's face seemed vaguely familiar to her.

Her mind harked back to that day of the storm, the day when she and the other Outdoor Girls had sought shelter in the farmer's barn. There was the picture of the stalwart young Eben returning with the captured gypsy and the bag containing the squawking chickens. Behind them, farther back in the woods, Stella had caught sight, for one fleeting second, of a shadowy, peering face. It might have been a pixie's, it was so vague

and indistinct and disappeared so instantly. But now Stella knew to whom it had belonged!

This lad, then, was one of the gypsy tribe. Had he been sent by Hulah to lure her into the woods with this story of an injured comrade?

Now thoroughly alert, her senses abnormally quickened, Stella looked about her.

Was it only imagination, or were there shadowy figures moving among the trees!

Ah! Something had stirred! There—behind the tree! That, at least, was not imagination.

Stella's heart beat wildly. She found it hard to get her breath. Something caught at her throat, stifling her.

She turned, and with no other object than escape, stumbled wildly, blindly, along the path she had just traversed.

The boy called after her.

"Would you leave your friend to die?" The voice was shrill with anger.

Stella did not look behind her. She was afraid of what she might see. To fall into the hands of the gypsies! To be kidnaped by them and carried away! What more awful fate could one conceive?

Ah! *That* was not imagination!

Some one was pursuing her. Not quietly, either, but openly, muttering as he ran. Twigs cracked beneath his feet. He was gaining—Stella could hear that he was gaining.

She sobbed aloud and prayed for strength.

"If I could just get near enough to the boys and girls to call," she thought desperately.

How far had she come into the woods? It had not seemed far when she had followed the gypsy boy, but now it was miles, endless miles.

The sound of pursuit came nearer. Any moment now, Stella knew, a swarthy hand might descend upon her shoulder!

She summoned all her strength for one last burst of speed.

"Girls! Boys!" she screamed. "Help! He-elp!"

An answering cry came to her, faint and far away, but coming closer.

"Oo-oo! Stella! Where are you?"

"Here!" sobbed Stella. "Oh, hurry! Hurry! He-elp!"

The nightmare sound of pursuing footsteps stopped. Stella dared look over her

shoulder. She saw a thick-set figure dart aside and lose itself in the bushes.

She could have sobbed for joy, but she kept on running, forcing her tired limbs onward. If she faltered now, the gypsy might come back. She could not stop until she was safe among her friends.

When she finally came upon the boys and girls, she was so weak that she could not cover the few remaining steps between them, but sank to the ground, utterly spent.

Irene ran to her and put an arm beneath her head, raising her up. Carolyn knelt on her other side, chafing her hands and crooning words of comfort.

"What was it, honey?" Irene asked. "What frightened you so?"

When she could get her breath, Stella told them. As she revealed the villainous plot, the young folks listened, at first with incredulity and horror, then with a growing anger.

"We'll search the woods and rout out those dogs!" cried Clem. "Come on, boys, let's get after them!"

"Be careful!" begged Stella. "Those gypsies are the worst kind of scoundrels. I wouldn't put any crime past them!"

"If any one gets hurt, it won't be us!" Dick Blossom replied grimly.

Left alone, the girls exchanged amazed, angry, worried looks.

"I'd be willing to wager that that horrible Hulah is behind this!" Lota cried. "I wouldn't trust that old hag as far away as I could see her."

"Still, kidnaping is a serious crime," Amy pointed out. "In some states it ranks with murder and carries the same penalty. You'd think even this Hulah of yours would stop short of that."

"You haven't seen her," Meg responded. "She's a horrible old woman, and, for some reason or other, she hates us all. I wish," she added vindictively, "that the boys would find her! We could probably put her in jail for this."

But the boys came back empty-handed.

"We've been all over the place," Clem said, "and not a trace can we find of the gypsies. They seem to have made a clean escape."

The incident of the gypsies colored all the events of that late afternoon and evening. When Will and Frank heard the story, they joined with their wives and the other boys

in urging the Outdoor Girls to give up their hike.

"Stay with us for a while," Frank urged. "We'll see that you have a good vacation and when you get tired of us Will and I will see you safely back to Deepdale."

But the girls refused to listen.

"We started out on a hike and we are going to finish it, thanks just the same for your kind intentions," said Stella. It required considerable courage to speak so resolutely, for the events of the afternoon were still painfully fresh in her mind. "No band of miserable gypsies is going to cheat us out of our hike! No sir!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE DESERTED HOUSE

When the married folk found it impossible to argue with the Outdoor Girls, they went into secret conference.

"We've got to do something about it, Frank," Grace said. "We can't let them go on this hike with those miserable gypsies camping on their trail. Why, I'll be so worried I won't be able to sleep at night."

"I agree with you, my dear. It's rank foolishness, if you ask me," Frank replied. "On the other hand, I don't see exactly what we are going to do about it. We can hardly tie them up here in the house and forbid them to go on with their hike."

"We might write to their people in Deepdale," Amy suggested, worried lines tracing a frown on her forehead. "A command from home would probably have some effect."

Grace shook her head.

"They'd resent that bitterly, Amy," she said. "You know how we would have felt

when we were in their shoes. We would have considered an act like that rank treachery."

Amy nodded.

"I suppose you are right," she conceded. "We were rather rash and reckless ourselves, once upon a time. Still, we must do something about it. Will," turning appealingly to her young husband, "haven't you a single suggestion to make?"

Will had been striding up and down the room. Now he came and sat down near his wife and his sister, while Frank stood by the window.

"Yes, I've an idea," he said. "Lend me your ears—and see if it appeals to you."

For a full half hour the secret conference lasted, and when it was over the conspirators all seemed fairly well satisfied.

Blissfully unconscious of the fact that their immediate future was being arranged for them, the Outdoor Girls started out early the following morning.

They escorted Clem, Dick and Hal as far as the railway station. Then, a little impatiently, they answered directions in regard to the future conduct of their hike.

"We shall be all right," they insisted

again and again. "I don't see why everybody is worrying so much about us. Go on now, don't bother—and we'll see you later."

After the departure of the boys, there were Grace and Amy to settle with before the girls were free to go on their way once more.

"We have had a beautiful time," they told the married girls. "You have been too good to us. Yes—we'd like to stay longer, much longer. But—well, a hike's a hike, you know. Good-by, dears. We'll drop you a line just as soon as we reach Betty's place."

It was hard to tear themselves away, and it was still harder for Amy and Grace to stand still and see the hikers go.

"I don't like it," said Amy, as she and Grace turned away and started back in the direction of the bungalow. "It seems criminal to let them go off like this after all that has happened."

Grace smiled a little and put an arm about her sister-in-law.

"I don't think it's a question of 'letting them go,' dear," she said. "It strikes me that the Outdoor Girls will do pretty much what they want to do under any set of circumstances. Anyway, they can't run into any very terrible danger—if our plan works."

"That's right," said Amy, with a relieved sigh. "It's a comfort to have Will and Frank on our side."

Grace laughed and hugged her friend happily.

"I've a notion we shall always have Frank and Will 'on our side'," she said. "They have the habit. And what a lovely habit it is!"

Meanwhile the Outdoor Girls had started off with enthusiasm and optimism on what was to be the last and longest portion of their hike.

The bungalow of Allan and Betty Washburn was far up in the hills, two or three days' journey even after the girls reached the woods. And before that they would spend several days hiking along the seashore.

"Me, I'm not too anxious to take to the woods again," said Irene Moore, with a crooked little smile. "The seashore is good enough for me—for a while."

Needless to say, the girls were all of the same opinion. Stella's adventure was still startlingly fresh in their minds. It had proved to them that the enmity of the gypsies was a thing to be feared, and not, as they had first thought, to be treated as a joke,

something to be shrugged off and told of after dinner before the fire and surrounded by a group of interested and sympathetic friends.

"Although I can't think the gypsies really planned to abduct you, Stella," Meg said, in discussing the incident. "Probably they only meant to give you a good scare as a sort of revenge for whatever petty grudge they think they have against us."

"Well, if a good scare was what they were after, they certainly accomplished that," Stella admitted ruefully. "I was never so frightened in my life!"

The first day's hike was absolutely uneventful. The weather continued fine, the people they met were pleasant and readily gave them whatever directions they needed. They found a small seaside hotel where they spent a night of profound rest from which they awoke, refreshed and eager to go on again.

Another day and another passed alike uneventfully. During all that time they caught not a glimpse of the gypsies. Their fear of the swarthy-skinned vagabonds dwindled and in like proportion their spirits rose.

"We've shaken them at last," said Lota.

"Probably they've got tired trailing a bunch of girls who don't mean them any harm and are only too anxious to be let alone."

"Begins to look that way," said Stella, and added flippantly: "Hulah has given up the chase."

But the girls underrated both Hulah's tenacity and her truly remarkable capacity for hatred. Also, they were unaware that the aged crone held the Outdoor Girls responsible for the imprisonment of two of her prime favorites—Murillo and Pedro who had been sentenced to a brief sojourn in the county jail.

On the fourth day they were forced to leave the seashore in favor of the woods. This they did not like so well for, in spite of the fact that they were confident the gypsies had been left behind, the woods were filled with reminders of their unpleasant meetings with various members of the Romany tribe.

Often it seemed to them that a swarthy face peered out from behind a tree or bush; any unexplained sound in the woods filled them with apprehension.

"We are getting terribly nervous," Carolyn complained, toward the end of that long

day's hike. "We'll be imagining all sorts of awful things before we know it."

"We're just tired, I guess," said Stella.

She paused and looked about her. The damp hair clung to her forehead and she pushed it back impatiently.

"We're tired," she repeated. "If we could find some place to camp for the night, I'd suggest that we settle down right now. We've traveled our ten miles to-day and more."

"Sounds fine to me," agreed Meg heartily. "I'm about tired out, and I don't care who knows it."

"Yeah," grunted Lota. She took off her hat and fanned herself with it. "The only difficulty seems to be that there is no place to camp. Unless we want to sleep out under the trees," she added, with a dubious glance about her.

"No thanks!" returned Carolyn. "After seeing gypsies behind trees all day and Hulah's face in every tangle of leaves, I can imagine pleasanter things than sleeping in the open."

"I'd never expect to wake up," stated Irene decidedly.

"Well, come on, then," said Stella. "If we

keep on walking far enough we are sure to reach shelter of some sort, if it is only a shed or a deserted barn."

"Only, we'd better make sure it is really deserted this time," Irene said, with a laugh. "We don't want to be mistaken for chicken thieves a second time."

But for a long, weary way they found no barn of any sort, either deserted or otherwise. They began to fear that the stars would have to be their canopy for one night, at least, "the mossy bank, their bed."

When they were nearly despairing a dark bulk suddenly loomed before them through the trees.

"A house!" cried Lota. "Thank goodness we have come to a house at last!"

"But not a light!" observed Meg, as they stood and stared at the gloomy edifice.

"It's just on the edge of dusk," Stella pointed out. "Maybe they haven't thought to put on the lights yet."

But as the girls neared the house they saw that it was, indeed, deserted; in all probability it had been so for a considerable length of time.

Some of the windows had been broken and then boarded up. Others had been broken

and left to stand as they were, like gaping, sightless orbs.

They made the girls shudder.

"I think I'd rather spend the night under the trees," Carolyn said.

The rickety boards of the porch gave under their feet. For mere form's sake and not because they expected any response they pulled at the door bell. A rusty rattle echoed through the house, proving, if nothing else had, how completely empty, deserted, and forlorn it was.

The girls waited for a long minute. They scarcely knew why they waited, unless it was to let that ghastly rattle die out.

Then Stella turned the doorknob. It did not yield.

"Locked from the inside," she said. "I don't know but what we will have to sleep under the stars, after all. We can hardly hope to break the door down."

"There's a window broken on the first floor around at the side. I saw it," said Irene. "I could probably get through by standing on Meg's back."

"If you're game to try, all right," responded Stella. "Come along."

It was an easy enough matter to climb on

Meg Bronson's strong back and then to scramble through the broken window.

Irene lost her balance on the other side and fell to the floor, raising a cloud of dust. She lay very still. Was it fancy, or had she heard the sound of some one moving close to her in the darkness?

CHAPTER XX

SIGNS

For a long moment Irene Moore lay quiet, listening intently. Even her breathing was stilled.

From without she could hear the girls calling to her. Her silence alarmed them. Still she did not move nor speak.

As her eyes became accustomed to the dusk within the place, she could see more clearly. Nothing was there but emptiness. Not even a stick of furniture graced the big bare room.

"I probably didn't hear a thing," she told herself. "Or if I did, it was probably a bat or a rat."

She shuddered a little over this last surmise. Still, even rats were preferable to unfriendly men and women.

"Tramps!" she thought. "It's possible that tramps may have made this old deserted house a rendezvous, a meeting place. If that is so, we may have walked into a nest of thieves or—or—worse."

She shook off this unwelcome thought.

"I can't stay here all night," she told herself, and got silently to her knees. The dust was thick about her. It rose in clouds at her slightest gesture.

"The place must have been deserted for years to get like this," her thoughts ran on.

Whatever the sound was that she had heard, or fancied she had heard, as she toppled through the window, it was not repeated. However, as Irene went over to the window to speak to the girls outside she had an uneasy feeling that some one was watching her from the shadows beyond the gaping doorway.

Yet when she turned quickly, her heart in her mouth, there was nothing to be seen.

"I must stop imagining things," she told herself sharply. "It isn't healthy!"

She found Stella in the act of following her into the room.

"Goodness!" cried the latter, as she scrambled over the window sill. "Why didn't you answer us? We were scared to death!"

"I thought I heard something." Irene came close to her chum and whispered this confession in her ear so that the girls outside could not possibly hear. "It was probably

only my imagination, but I thought I'd better tell you, in case you didn't want to take a chance on bringing the girls in here."

Stella looked worried.

"I don't know what to do," she confessed. "We might walk another ten miles without finding anything better than this. These woods are pretty well deserted, you know. Besides, we wouldn't be able to camp outside if we wanted to. It's beginning to rain."

"Then let's make the best of this," Irene suggested. "I haven't seen a thing alarming and probably I didn't hear anything, either—just my imagination run amuck."

The result was that the three girls still outside were invited to enter the house.

"Come around to the front and we'll open the door for you," said Stella.

As it turned out, this was easier said than done. The door was a heavy one. The lock was old and rusty and resisted their best efforts for some time.

Finally it gave groaningly, and the door swung open.

The girls did not like the looks of that hall. They were distinctly suspicious of the rooms opening out of it, of the great, shadowy staircase that led up from it.

"It's like a vault or a tomb," Carolyn Cooper objected. "I'd rather sleep out under the stars."

"There will be few stars to sleep under to-night," Meg returned. "Listen!"

They all listened and heard the sharp tattoo of the rain beating on the roof of the porch outside.

"Sounds to me," said Lota, "as if we had found shelter in the nick of time."

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed Stella approvingly. "We'll have to make the best of a very poor bargain."

"But how about food?" groaned Meg. "I'm just about starved and my knapsack boasts one dried-up ham sandwich."

"I haven't anything but a peach that is slightly squashed," added Lota.

"If we can find the kitchen of this place," Irene suggested, "we might discover something to eat, canned stuff, perhaps. A tin of baked beans would be most welcome to me right now."

Her fellow hikers agreed with her, but afterwards admitted that nothing less than their gnawing hunger could have driven them to explore that musty, dust-filled, mysterious old house.

"In the daytime it would have been bad enough," Carolyn said later. "But just then, on the edge of dark with the rain coming down in torrents outside and shadows making a mysterious cavern of every dark corner, I tell you, it was creepy enough!"

Of course, they had their flashlights handy, and more than once during the next several minutes they had reason to be thankful that they had had sufficient foresight to have their batteries tested and several of them renewed before leaving the last post of rural civilization.

They made a dust-choked progress through several rooms before they came at last to the apartment that had evidently once served the old house as a kitchen.

What they expected to see here they hardly knew. But certainly it was nothing like what they did see.

On an old deal table in the center of the floor, dishes were piled high, dirty dishes that had been shoved aside by whoever had last used them and left to collect dirt and a choice assortment of insects.

"Ugh!" cried Carolyn, the dainty, in disgust. "How horrible! Girls, let's get out of here!"

"Wait a minute!" said Stella. "We'll get out. But first we'll have a careful look around for some canned goods. Some one else evidently has found food here. So can we!"

"But, Stella!" Lota pointed to a plate upon which were the remnants of a can of salmon. "This food is fresh. Some one has been here recently! He may even be around now for all we know!"

The thought was an extremely unpleasant one. The girls looked about them uneasily. It is possible that, if it were not for the brisk patter of the rain outside, the girls would have taken to their heels without further thought, infinitely preferring the out-of-doors to the mysterious threat of fresh salmon on a plate.

"Then I did not imagine that sound, after all!" thought Irene, and shivered.

"Look here, girls! We've got to pull ourselves together!" Stella spoke with a resolution she was very far from feeling. "If any one has been here, he has probably departed before this. In the meantime, we have to find food. If I am not mistaken, that is probably the pantry door over there," she flashed her light on a door that stood

partly ajar, suggesting a gaping cavern of mystery beyond.

"If any of you are game to follow me, come on," continued Stella resolutely. "If there is anything edible in that closet, I am going to have it!"

The challenge was one that the honor of the Outdoor Girls commanded them to accept.

The others crowded behind their leader as she boldly approached the pantry door. Stella raised her flashlight and moved it in a sweeping circle about the place.

Nothing!

The girls breathed a sigh of relief. Their fears were not to be realized—not here, at any rate.

Slowly Stella moved her flashlight along the shelves that flanked the pantry walls. She cried aloud gleefully as the illumination showed her a small stock of canned goods.

"There's some minced ham here and beans and sardines," she cried. "Girls, we are going to dine sumptuously."

But as she reached for a can she drew back and uttered a startled exclamation. Her eyes had fallen upon a large sign done in black lettering which the light had thus far

failed to reveal. She stepped back a hurried pace or two, almost bumping into Irene and Carolyn.

"What is it?" they demanded. "Did you see anything?"

"Read that sign!" gasped Stella, and turned the flashlight full upon it.

"I know you!" read Irene. *"Touch nothing on these shelves on peril of your life!"*

CHAPTER XXI

A MISERABLE NIGHT

THAT sign did something rather dreadful to the hikers. They forgot for the moment that they were Outdoor Girls, and, as such, must face all situations bravely.

All they wanted was to get away from those horrible black letters and the threat contained in them.

The dark was no longer merely mysterious. It had become filled with sinister shadows.

They stumbled through the rooms. Lota Bronson was fumbling with the knob of the front door when Stella caught up to her.

"Girls, there's more danger outside than in, on a night like this," she cried. "Here! Come into this room!"

Their leader half coaxed, half dragged them into a room, opening directly off the main hall. She had noticed earlier that this door not only boasted a lock, but, what was more important, the key was still in it.

When the girls were all within the room,

Stella slammed the door shut and turned the key. From the panic haste with which all this was done one might have thought a pursuer was right at their heels.

Not content with the rasp of the key as it turned in the lock, Stella must needs shake the door to make sure that the bolt held. Then she leaned against it, trembling, half-sobbing, half-laughing.

"What fools we are to let a mere s-sign frighten us so!" she gasped.

"But some one put the sign there," said practical Meg. "It didn't just grow in that place, you know, Stella."

"We don't know," suggested Carolyn, in a low shuddering voice. "We don't know but what the person who hung up that sign is in this v-very room."

"We don't know, but we can soon find out!" said Stella, sharply. "Use your flashlights, girls. Examine every corner. If there's a closet, we'll look into that, too."

Her followers obeyed her, fearfully enough, not knowing what flash of light might reveal some terrible thing.

But they finally decided to their complete satisfaction and unbounded relief that the room was untenanted save by themselves. It

contained no closet. There was a door connecting it with a room beyond, but, fortunately, this door was also furnished with a key.

Meg crossed the room swiftly and locked this door.

"Now the windows!" said Stella, with the air of a general giving orders.

There were three of these, two of them boarded up, while the glass in the third remained intact.

"Some luck, anyway," said Meg. "It begins to look as though the author of that sign would have a good time getting in, either from inside or out—without giving us considerable warning, anyway."

"I wish now," said Lota regretfully, "that we had filched some of those cans from the shelves while we had a chance. Minced ham would taste good, and as for beans——"

"Make her stop," begged Carolyn. "I'll begin to gnaw shoe leather before long. I feel it coming on."

Although they talked over the advisability of once more seeking the pantry and raiding its shelves, they found great difficulty in discovering any one who was willing to vol-

unteer for the service. That sign still haunted them.

"The house is probably haunted, anyway," Lota suggested, with an uneasy giggle. "All old deserted houses in the country are supposed to be, you know."

"What a thought!" cried Carolyn. "When we have to spend the night here, too!"

"No spirit piled up that mess of dirty dishes," Meg said, with her usual practical good sense, for which Stella was willing to bless her at that trying moment. "Moreover, I'm willing to bet it was a very substantial ghost who wrote that sign and set it up to warn off—well, people like ourselves."

"A tramp, probably," agreed Stella, "who camps out here regularly and isn't anxious to have any one else find his cache. And now," she added, "I'd suggest that we break out whatever provisions—stale or otherwise—that we happen to have with us and eat them up. It may be a long time before we get anything to eat—since I presume none of you will care a lot about having breakfast here!"

They all agreed, and, rather dismally, opened knapsacks in search of lunch rem-

nants. They dined on these scraps as best they could and then lay down on the dusty floor, determined to sleep if sleep could be in any manner, shape or form, lured by them.

It was an uneasy, restless night, and although nothing alarming occurred to break their slumbers, the house was alive with mysterious noises; creaks and groanings and the ceaseless dripping of the rain which sounded like the fall of stealthy footsteps.

Through the dark hours Carolyn wondered about her heirlooms, about poor old Mr. Fennelson, about Hal. She wondered if Hal were still on the trail of the thief. Would her precious heirlooms ever be recovered?

Once, when Carolyn thought of her mother's locket, she wept, listening to the monotonous fall of the rain.

With dawn the rain stopped, and never was any one so glad to greet the sun as were the Outdoor Girls after a night spent in the mysterious old house.

Through one cobwebbed windowpane a sunbeam came, creeping across the dusty floor, beckoning the travelers toward a clean, revivified, radiant out-of-doors.

The girls were cramped and weary. Their lungs were clogged with dust.

"I know now why people break windows!" exclaimed Irene. "I'd just love to hurl a stone through this one and let in a breath of fresh air."

"We'll get plenty of that where we're going," said Stella. She was brushing the dust from her knickers as best she could, tucking back stray locks of hair. "We'll break out of this awful place as fast as we can, girls, and find our breakfast outside," she added, and opened the door.

Again she stepped back with a startled exclamation. Another sign confronted her, propped against an empty tomato can.

Over her shoulder her wide-eyed companions read:

WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE! GET OUT AND STAY OUT!

The girls obeyed the admonition without delay! Their only wish was to shake the dust of that dreadful place from their feet forever.

They charged out through the open front door—they did not stop then to wonder who had opened it—ran and did not stop running until they were forced to halt for lack of

breath. Then they stopped and stared at each other.

"A sorry looking crowd, we are!" cried Lota. "We've dust an inch thick on us. And, oh, my, I'm hungry!"

They walked on until they discovered a stream that looked as if it might make good fishing. On their way they had picked up several stout sticks and, having lines and hooks in their knapsacks, soon fashioned some rude fishing tackle.

Irene dug up worms for bait, having found a spot where they were plentiful.

The fishing proved to be quite successful. It is true that they hooked several beauties which they failed to bring ashore. However, they soon had a catch guaranteed to make many a more experienced angler envious.

Irene and Meg cleaned and prepared the fish while the other girls collected wood for a fire.

What a breakfast it was! The girls ate the fish down to the last, infinitesimal bit of succulent white flesh.

They went on their way soon after that, refreshed and strengthened by their brief repast and eager to make up for lost time.

"If we step out," Stella said, "I think we

ought to be able to make Betty's place by day after to-morrow." She paused and appeared to examine a trail that ran counter to the one they were on.

"Girls," she said, as they came up to her, "I think this is the trail they told us about in the last village, the trail that leads directly up to Betty's bungalow."

"The one through the hills," mused Irene. "It's apt to be pretty hard going, Stella."

"But shorter by almost a day's hike," added Carolyn. "And more interesting probably. I vote we try it."

The vote was carried in the affirmative and the girls struck off along the hill trail.

They tramped steadily all morning, stopping at noon to fish again.

"Fish may be all right once in a while," Lota remarked, eying a small catfish with little relish; "but as a steady diet I must say it gets monotonous."

"Let's hope we strike some sort of house or village before to-night," said Meg. "We should," she added, "if the information we've collected on the trip is worth anything."

All through the long afternoon they hiked through the hills. The country was heavily wooded, almost virgin in its suggestion of

isolation. Though they tramped for miles and kept on tramping, they could discover no sign of human habitation.

They halted finally before a mass of rocks that crested a hillside directly ahead of them.

Carolyn spoke with sudden resolution.

"I'm going to climb that pile of rocks and see what's on the other side of it," she said. "If there is a house within two miles of us we are going to get to it—and soon!"

She climbed the rocks swiftly and stood upon the flat face of one of them, staring out over the valley.

Suddenly she raised her arms in a queer gesture, cried out suddenly, and disappeared from view!

CHAPTER XXII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

WITHOUT the exchange of a word, the rest of the Outdoor Girls began swiftly, grimly to scale the rocks. They did not need to ask themselves what had happened. They knew!

Having arrived at the top, there was still no trace of Carolyn Cooper. On this side, the rocks shelved downward at a sharp angle. A magnificent view of valley with gleaming river at its base spread out before them. They were in no mood, however, to enjoy the view.

"There she is!" said Lota suddenly. "Wedged in between two rocks."

"She's safe, anyway," said Stella thankfully. "The question now is, how are we going to get down to her?"

"I'll try," offered Meg. "I'm used to mountain climbing, you know. I'll make it, all right."

"I'm going, too," said Lota. As Meg

started to speak she added resolutely: "I'd like to see you or any one else stop me, Meg Bronson—even if you are my twin!"

Meg shrugged her shoulders.

"Have it your own way," she said, and without further words began the perilous descent.

Carolyn had fallen for a distance of perhaps fifteen feet. Stunted bushes grew among the rocks and these had probably broken her fall and saved her from more serious injury.

She was wedged now between two jagged rocks, and from the way she drooped against one of them the Bronson twins had reason to fear that she had been rendered unconscious by her fall.

Those above watched eagerly as Meg and Lota made the descent in safety. They saw Meg reach a tiny ledge and cling there, near to the rocks that imprisoned Carolyn. Her twin followed close on her heels. With swift relief Stella and Irene saw the girl raise her head and speak to her would-be rescuers.

"She isn't unconscious, after all," muttered Irene.

"Which is lucky!" said Stella, gripping her

THEY CARRIED HER UP THE STEEP SLOPE.

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hands together till the knuckles showed white. "If we only had a rope to throw them, Irene!"

They had no rope, but, as it turned out, they needed none.

Meg and Lota were mountain-bred. They had learned to scale steep cliffs and follow next-to-impassable trails almost before they had been able to walk.

Carolyn, with an arm about the neck of each of them, supported herself thus while they carried her inch by inch up the steep slope, to set her at last, safe but badly frightened, beside the other Outdoor Girls.

She tried to put her foot upon the ground and cried out sharply.

"I'm afraid I must have twisted my ankle a little," she said, her face white with pain. "I felt it turn when I struck the rocks. I—oh dear, if I've gone and crippled myself, what shall I do!"

Her companions rolled down her stocking and examined the injury. It was evidently not a bad sprain, though the ankle had swollen a little and would, in all probability, swell more before the day was over.

"You're lucky," observed Irene, as Car-

olyn refastened the sport stocking over the leg of her knickers. "You're mighty lucky you didn't break your neck."

"I might have at any minute if it hadn't been for Meg and Lota," replied Carolyn gratefully. "When I looked at that awful drop into the valley I felt weak and dizzy. I really expected to faint and topple over!"

It did not take the hikers long to discover that Carolyn's injured ankle would seriously impede their progress. She could barely hobble on it, and that only with considerable pain. It was plain that they must find shelter—and a doctor—as soon as possible.

This sounded simple, but, in reality, was a rather formidable thing to face. To make matters worse, they discovered suddenly that they were lost.

"We've wandered off the trail someway or other," stated Stella. Her tone was desperate. Night was coming on. One of their members was quite seriously injured. And now they were lost! "We've got to find that trail, girls. We've got to find it before dark, or goodness knows what may happen to us."

The girls scattered in several directions; all, that is, save Carolyn Cooper, who was

glad to sit down on a rock and nurse her injured ankle.

In spite of their frantic searching, they did not come upon the trail.

But Lota found something else.

Her shrill cry brought the others running to her. Even Carolyn hobbled painfully from her rock. There was an urgency in Lota's call that would not be denied.

Lota came running toward her companions from the clearing beyond a heavy thicket of trees.

"Girls!" she cried, "I've found the most marvelous thing! Come here, do!"

They needed no second invitation. They crowded behind her through the grove of trees until they stood upon the edge of a clearing. There they saw it—a great bird, silent, but with wings spread as though in contemplated flight.

"An airplane!" cried Meg. "Of all the places in the world to find it!"

"It must have had a pilot," Stella remarked, giving a hasty glance over the plane. "And he wasn't forced down here, either. The plane is in perfectly good shape."

"I only hope he is around somewhere—

the pilot, I mean," said poor Carolyn. "Maybe he could take us some place in his plane and I could get my ankle fixed up."

Stella went to her quickly and put an arm about her.

"Poor girl!" she cried. "Does the ankle hurt dreadfully, Carol?"

"Pretty much," Carolyn admitted, with a one-sided smile. "But I'm worried more on account of you girls than for myself. I don't know how I am going to walk very far."

Here Lota had a suggestion to make.

"I think we'd better sit right down here and wait for the pilot to come back," she said. "Poor Carolyn simply can't walk with her ankle in that shape. Therefore, we must let her fly!"

"Sounds good," admitted Meg. "The only bothersome question is, where's the pilot?"

Irene continued her search of the plane. The silent, man-made monster seemed to fascinate her.

"I've never had a chance to see one at such close quarters," she said, when the girls commented on her interest. "I can sit in the pilot's seat here and imagine I know how to handle the controls and—" She broke off

suddenly and stared at something that lay at her feet. It was a small, leather-covered notebook.

"What did you find?" asked Stella, coming to the side of the plane. "A hundred dollar bill?"

"Only a notebook," Irene returned. "But it may give a clue to the pilot's identity."

She flicked the pages of the book idly, automatically. Suddenly she paused, fingers holding down the page, eyes caught and held by something she saw there.

"What is it?" Stella queried curiously. "Let me see!"

"Stella!" Irene gasped. "Why, I can't believe it! The name on this page is—oh, you will never guess!"

Impatiently Stella took the book from Irene's hand.

"Hal Duckworth!" she read aloud. "Why, this book is his property! Girls, it's impossible! It's absolutely incredible!"

The rest of them crowded about her, staring at the name, Hal Duckworth, under the caption, "The property of——"

"Where did you find the book?" Carolyn demanded.

Irene was still seated in the pilot's seat, the controls before her. She pointed dramatically to her feet.

"Right here," she said, "As though Hal had dropped it, getting out of the plane."

"Then do you believe it really is Hal's plane?" asked Lota, wondering.

Carolyn shook her head. She looked puzzled.

"Hal can't fly a plane yet," she said thoughtfully. "I'm quite sure he hasn't a pilot's license. But there may be some one with him—a regular pilot, I mean. Anyway, this notebook seems to be pretty good evidence that he is somewhere in the vicinity."

Carolyn paused. She thought of what Hal had hinted to her that day on the beach with Grace and Amy and the others. He was engaged in some mysterious business, something he could not talk about—even to her!

Suddenly she sat down on the ground and burst into tears.

"Why, Carol, what's wrong?" Meg bent down to pat her solicitously on the shoulder. "The poor ankle again? Does it hurt as badly as all that?"

"It isn't my a-ankle," sobbed Carolyn. "I don't care how badly it hurts. I wasn't,

thinking of myself! I was thinking of poor H-Hal!"

"But why cry about Hal?" broke in Stella, mystified. "He's all right. I expect he'll turn up any minute and take charge of us all."

"Don't cry, honey," Irene soothed. "Everything will be all right, once Hal gets here."

But Carolyn continued to sob and shake her head.

"I'm sure something has h-happened to him," she said, feeling blindly in her pocket and bringing forth a fair-sized handkerchief with which she mopped her eyes. "I know you think I'm a goose—and probably my ankle *has* something to do with my acting like such an infant. Just the same, I have a hunch that—something has happened to Hal. I can't tell you why I think so because I don't think he'd want me to. But I do think so, just the same."

Carolyn's insistence had the effect of impressing her seemingly irrational fears upon the other girls. The presence of the plane in the clearing was mysterious enough, but the continued absence of its pilot and Hal could be explained still less rationally.

Why had the plane landed in this deserted

spot, and, having landed, why should the pilot and Hal disappear and stay away?

These questions the Outdoor Girls asked themselves, without an answer presenting itself. It appeared that they would have to wait for the aviators themselves to solve the problem.

"Though I have a—" began Irene. "Do you think, girls, that Hal's being here has anything to do with the gypsies?" she went on.

"Of course, anything's possible," responded Meg. "But I think that's a far-fetched suggestion."

"I suppose so," agreed Irene. "Still—" But she did not finish the sentence and no one else took up the thought.

Meanwhile it seemed that their most sensible course—in fact, their only one—was to sit down quietly and await to see what should happen.

Suddenly Stella cried out; then clapped her hand across her lips.

"Girls, come away from here!" she cried tensely. "Come away! Be quick!"

CHAPTER XXIII

AMONG THE TREES

The other Outdoor Girls did not stop to argue with their leader. Fear was in Stella Sibley's voice. They followed her swiftly and without question away from the clearing and into the woods. Meg and Irene half carrying Carolyn.

On, on Stella led them, plunging ever deeper into the woods. It soon became plain to her followers that they were losing their sense of direction. They would soon not be able to find their way back to the clearing and the airplane even if they wanted to.

Meg voiced this protest to her leader.

"Never mind!" cried Stella impatiently. "Come on!"

Finally Carolyn groaned and sank to the ground.

"I can't go on any further, girls," she cried. "Don't stop for me. Go on without me!"

Of course this was out of the question. While the girls who were assisting Carolyn

paused, not knowing what to do next, Stella came running back to them. They noticed that she glanced over her shoulder into the woods repeatedly.

"We must go on!" she told them. "We'll have to get away from this terrible place, if we have to carry Carolyn!"

"I'm too heavy," sobbed Carolyn. "You girls go on and send some one back to help me."

Meg caught Stella's arm.

"What frightened you?" she cried. "Don't look like that, Stella," she added sharply. "Any one might think you had seen a ghost!"

"Worse!" said Stella, in a low voice. She began to tremble and could not stop. "I happened to look into the woods past the plane and I saw gypsies, girls—three of them! I had a feeling there were others. No—" impatiently—"I couldn't be mistaken! I saw them, I tell you, as clearly as I see you now! We must get away—get away at once!"

Her fear communicated itself to the other girls. At once it seemed to them that the woods were filled with shadowy figures, not a tree but sheltered a lurking foe!

Carolyn stumbled to her feet. Her face

went white with pain. She cried out and caught at Stella to steady herself.

"All right," she muttered, between tight-shut lips. "If you won't leave me, I'll try to walk. But I don't know how far I'll get."

That flight through the woods was one long nightmare. Every moment the girls became more deeply entangled in the leafy wilderness. By leaving the vicinity of the mysterious plane in which they had found the notebook belonging to Hal Duckworth, they knew that they were deserting their one hope of returning to civilization before darkness closed down upon them. And they were lost!

One question hammered persistently in their weary minds. Were they being followed by the gypsies?

The answer they could not determine for themselves; for, though they paused several times and listened intently, achingly, they could hear no sound in the tense, shadow-filled silence of the woodland. No branches swayed, no twig cracked, nothing to tell of any presence there save their own.

And yet they felt sure that they were being trailed, silently, stealthily by those who

knew the woods as Indians know them and can walk as silently.

Carolyn's ankle gave out completely before long and the girls, in pairs, took turns carrying her on a seat made of their interlaced hands.

It was slow, heartbreaking going. Suddenly Irene paused and faced her comrades rebelliously.

"I don't know why we are doing this!" she cried. "Or where we are going! We are losing ourselves more hopelessly every moment. And we certainly can't imagine that we have a chance to outstrip the gypsies, traveling at this snail's pace."

"Oh, hush!" cried Carolyn, looking about her uneasily. "If they should hear——"

"Let them!" cried Irene recklessly. "If the gypsies are really following us, do you suppose it is going to make any difference to them what we *say?*"

"Wait!" cried Meg. She gripped Irene's arm in a grasp that hurt. "There *is* some one! I saw the bush move! Look!"

"They all looked and there, clearly revealed to them for the moment like a portrait in a leafy frame, was the face of Hulah, the gypsy!

This time there could be no mistake. They had all seen it!

The girls turned and began to run again. Stella and Meg carried Carolyn, stumbling blindly, desperately, through the all-but-impenetrable woods.

The fact that they were permitted to go on and were not immediately captured halted them after a few minutes. If the gypsies were so close to them, why did they not capture them and be done with it?

"They want to play with us, maybe, like a cat with a mouse," suggested Lota, shuddering.

"Or perhaps their object is only to frighten us, after all," said Stella, with gallant optimism.

"More likely we are running into a trap and they know it," said Meg grimly. "For my part, I vote that we stay right where we are and make them come out into the open."

Lota, scouting ahead, came back to them excitedly.

"There's a wagon road just past this patch of woods," she said. "It has been used recently, for the ground is still soft and the ruts are new."

"Made by the gypsy wagons, probably," said Meg.

"Maybe," returned Lota, "but that isn't the point. That woods road leads somewhere —to the main road, possibly."

Stella was on her feet. Excitement painted twin spots of red on her cheeks.

"Come on!" she cried. "Do or die is our motto from now on. If the gypsies want us, they will have to be quick about it!"

She and Meg picked Carolyn up again and Lota and Irene led the way to the wagon road.

They could see that the ruts in it were, as Lota had said, deep and freshly made. It was quite evident that wagons had passed that way recently—heavy wagons. Did these wagons belong to the gypsy caravan and were they, the Outdoor Girls, running straight into a trap set for them by the gypsies?

The wagon road widened as it wound through the woods. At last the girls saw what their eager eyes were straining to see—a broad, rutted ribbon, the main road!

How their tired feet stumbled toward it!

But other feet ran toward it, too. The sound of pursuit was quite close now.

"They are going around," sobbed Carolyn,

"so as to meet us at the road and cut us off! I see one—two— Oh, girls, dodge back into the woods! We can't make it!"

The girls halted, irresolute, not knowing what to do. At that moment there came to their ears a sound, a glorious sound, a welcome sound—the chug-chug of a motor! Help was coming down the road!

Without stopping to count the cost, Irene Moore charged into the middle of the road and stretched both arms across it for as far as they would go.

No one tried to bar her path. The gypsies, whatever their former intentions, had undoubtedly heard the approach of the automobile and were unwilling to make a demonstration until it had gone on.

The car dashed around a curve in the road. At sight of Irene the astonished driver cried out in warning. When the girl did not stir he manipulated the car to the side of the road, jammed on the brakes, and came to a jarring standstill.

"Say, listen!" cried the outraged driver. "What are you trying to do, anyway—commit suicide?"

There was something familiar about that voice. Irene stared for a moment; then

rushed over to the stalled car, her arms wide open.

"Allen Washburn!" she cried hysterically. "You perfect old darling! Come down out of that car while I hug you—or shall I climb up?"

Allen—for it was he—came down. He was considerably astonished by this salutation on the part of one he had taken for a complete stranger. But before his feet touched the road he recognized her.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" His eyes strayed from her to the other girls who were helping Carolyn across the road toward him. "How did *you* get here?"

"We were just taking a little hike—" Irene began hysterically, but Stella interrupted her.

"As to what we are doing here, we'd like to ask that question of you, Allen Washburn," she said. "Only we are too overjoyed to see you to think of questioning the kind Fates. Will you please let us get into your car? We—we're rather tired!"

For the first time Allen noticed how completely worn out they looked.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was

knocked all of a heap by this sudden, unexpected, and wholly delightful sight of you. I never noticed how done up you all were. Carolyn, what's the matter?"

"My ankle," said Carolyn, tight-lipped with pain. "Sprained it."

Allen lifted her into the car and deposited her in the back seat as comfortably as possible.

"I don't know where you were going when I met you," said Allen, with his friendly smile; "but I know where you are going now, and that's up to our bungalow. Make believe Betty won't welcome you!"

"Is it far away—the bungalow?" asked Stella.

"About five miles," Allen returned. He gave her a curious glance. "Were you, by any chance, headed in that direction?" he asked.

"We were, most decidedly," replied Stella. "Only we thought it would take us another full day, perhaps two, of hiking to reach it."

At this juncture Lota interrupted, pointing toward the woods. They discovered several lurking figures, and one of them, they felt sure, was that of the old crone, Hulah!

"Let's get out of here, Allen!" cried Stella. "We—we'll tell you all about everything when we have left this place behind."

Allen obligingly started his motor and the car got under way.

Allen's sudden appearance on the road just when they needed him most seemed little less than a miracle to the girls, although the explanation of his presence there was actually commonplace enough.

He had been on his way up from the village with provisions for Betty and had "just happened along." But what a difference that "happening" had made to the Outdoor Girls!

Looking back as the car sped onward, the girls thought they saw several gaudily dressed figures standing in the center of the road. Were they mistaken, or did one of them shake a threatening fist after the retreating car?

The five miles to the bungalow was a steady upward climb. The car—a second-hand one that knew how to negotiate hills—chugged steadily along.

Stella sat in the front seat with Allen and during the ride gave him a brief outline of their adventures from the bright morning

when they had set forth from Deepdale up to the present moment.

Allen was deeply interested. When told of their several meetings with the gypsies and of this last nightmare adventure, the young lawyer became furiously indignant and was for turning back at once and dealing with the vagabonds.

"Please don't!" begged Stella. "We have no desire to see more of them to-day. Then, too, there's Carolyn's ankle. That must be attended to at once or she may have serious trouble with it."

"Um-m! you're right, of course," said Allen. "But to-morrow the authorities shall hear about this. Those scoundrels should be jailed."

"It would have been a big comfort to us, if they had been jailed long ago," sighed Stella. "However, it would be ungrateful to complain. We did have the most marvelous luck, running into you this way!"

It was Lota who told of their experience in the mysterious old house.

"We have dubbed it the 'House of Signs,' " she said. "You couldn't move in the place without having a big printed placard thrust at you."

Allen chuckled, then looked serious.

"I think I know the place you mean," he said. "It's the house of a mad old man who hates people and tries to scare them off by printing signs and leaving them—the signs —in handy places."

"How pleasant!" sighed Meg. "A mad old man! Humph! Wonder we weren't all killed in our beds."

"We didn't have any beds," giggled Irene. "Maybe that's the reason we were spared!"

"All very well to joke about it now," said Stella soberly. "But I tell you, there wasn't much laughing done last night."

CHAPTER XXIV

CAUGHT

MEANWHILE, what of Hal and the airman who had piloted the plane to that deserted clearing in the woods?

Irene Moore had guessed correctly in at least one particular. Hal Duckworth was on the trail of Hulah's gypsy band in the belief that members of the tribe were responsible for the robbery of the Fennelson Curio Shop. Several clues which he had unearthed pointed in this one direction.

At the flying field where he was taking lessons in aviation he had succeeded in interesting one of the young instructors in his, Hal's, rôle of an amateur detective. The pilot, a young man named Jim Everett, had offered his services, as well as those of his plane, in an effort to trail the gypsies, fasten evidence of the crime upon the guilty members of the band, and recover, if possible, the loot stolen from Mr. Fennelson.

To follow the adventures of Hal and the

pilot it is necessary to go back a few hours from the time of the meeting of the Outdoor Girls with Allen Washburn.

Hal discovered the gypsy band encamped in a spot at the foot of a hill. He gestured to the pilot, and Everett brought the plane down in long, looping spirals.

They flew low over the gypsy encampment, Hal examining it through powerful field glasses.

He discovered what he sought and gestured to the pilot to make a landing as close to the spot as possible. Soon afterward Jim Everett discovered the clearing in the woods, tried for the perilous landing, and made it.

Hal was excited as he stepped from the plane. He pushed the goggles up on his forehead and stared about him.

"Pretty good central point from which to do some scouting, Jim," he said.

The pilot nodded. He took off his helmet, fanned himself, and looked thoughtfully at the surrounding woods.

"Take my advice," he said, "and go easy in monkeying with these gypsies. To my mind, all gypsies are outlaws. I wouldn't trust one of them as far as I could see him."

"Same here," Hal agreed cheerfully. "But

remember we have the power of the law back of us, Jim. I've a hunch I know the fellow who robbed Fennelson's store, and it won't take me long to fasten the crime on him—that is, if this scouting expedition turns out the way I want it to."

Leaving the plane in the clearing, the two pushed cautiously through the brushwood in the direction of the gypsy camp. It was not long before the smell of cooking and the sound of cautiously lowered voices warned the youths that they were nearing their goal.

Hal seized Everett by the shoulders and pushed him down to his knees.

"We'd better crawl the rest of the way," he whispered. "It would never do to have these gypsies discover us."

"Might gum up the works a bit," admitted Jim, grinning.

From then on the young men proceeded through the underbrush after the manner of reptiles, stealthily, scarcely rustling a leaf in their passage.

It was slow going, and the gypsy camp proved to be farther away than the two had thought. However, they came at last to a small hill, at the foot of which lay the gypsy caravan.

"What could be sweeter?" Hal whispered to his companion. "From here we can see all that is going on without being seen."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a rustling in the brushwood back of him caused both him and his companion to turn sharply about.

Several dark faces peered at them from among the trees. As Hal and Jim leaped to their feet the gypsies also came into the open. One of them, a giant of a fellow with broad shoulders and a wicked face, came close to Hal, glowering at him.

"What do you want, spying on our camp?" he demanded.

"None of your business!" replied Hal hotly.

Jim Everett put a hand upon his companion's arm, advising caution. But he was too late. Hal launched himself at the gigantic gypsy, closed with him. The two rolled upon the ground in a fierce embrace.

Jim tried to go to his friend's assistance but was immediately tackled by the three remaining gypsies.

The fight was vicious while it lasted. But the odds against Hal and Jim were too great.

Still struggling gamely, they were forced to submit while thongs made of stout vines were bound about their wrists and ankles, and gags, made of dirty bits of rag, thrust into their mouths.

They were then dragged before the old gypsy, Hulah, who spat in their faces and spurned them with her foot.

"Take them to the cave," commanded the old hag, rubbing her skinny hands together gleefully. "In the morning we can decide what is best to do with them."

So it came to pass that the prisoners were thrust into a damp and evil-smelling cave, unpleasantly suggestive of snakes. Despite the heat without, they were chilly within the cave and soon found themselves shivering as though with ague.

No food was brought to them, though Hulah visited them several times during the night, her wrinkled face hideous in the rays of a smoking oil lamp.

It was a terrible night, eons long, and yet the prisoners could not wish for morning. What fate would daylight bring to them?

Dawn was just streaking the sky with grey when Hal felt something moving in the

dark close to him. He thought it was a snake and sat bolt upright, hugging the damp wall of the cave.

"Be quiet!" hissed a voice—a voice he recognized—the voice of a friend! "We'll get you out of this if it takes a leg!"

Hal felt the thongs about his wrists give way. The owner of the friendly voice had cut them. He was free!

Now to return once more to the Outdoor Girls and Allen Washburn.

As they neared the bungalow of Allen and Betty Washburn far up in the hills, the Outdoor Girls were conscious of a growing excitement. This was the end of a long trail. They had accomplished their hike. And their eagerness to see Betty again grew by leaps and bounds.

"See that hill?" said Allen, pointing to a steep incline directly ahead of them. "Our bungalow is at the top of it. Now watch us pick up speed to make the grade!"

The car took the hill like a race horse. They fairly flew to the top of it, with no perceptible slackening of speed.

"Good!" applauded Irene, from the back seat.

"You sure have trained your car to climb hills, Allen," said Meg.

Allen chuckled.

"One that couldn't climb hills would be of small use to me," he said. "And here we are!"

He swung the car into a road that branched out from the main one. There sat the bungalow, a small, snug affair with a veranda surrounding three sides of it.

A small cocker spaniel dashed out to meet the car, barking wildly.

"Mr. Wags!" cried Irene joyfully. "What a pity we didn't bring Hesper along to keep you company!"

She jumped to the ground and embraced the small wriggling black animal. Mr. Wags continued to bark and tried to reach her face with his tongue.

Some one else appeared from the direction of the house now, evidently attracted by the noise.

It was Betty, of course—Betty, looking as sweet as ever and, if anything, more youthful. She wore a fresh figured voile and in it was so utterly huggable that the girls could not resist. They petted and kissed her and

gave her a jumbled account of their adventures all in that brief moment of greeting until she was completely bewildered and could only stand and stare at them.

"Please, darlings!" she cried. "Don't try to talk to me. It's too perfectly lovely having you here, and I don't care a lot how you came. Although it does arouse my curiosity a bit to have Allen bring you when all he promised to bring was a few old provisions. No! *Don't* talk! Come up to the house and you can tell me everything while I am getting supper on the table. You look half famished."

She had to be told about Carolyn's injured ankle then and was at once all tender solicitude.

Allen carried the girl into the house and held her while Betty fussed about, arranging a divan near the kitchen door so that Carolyn could be comfortable and still not feel "out of it" while the others helped with supper and told the story of their adventures.

Carolyn was only too thankful to be permitted to lie down. She stretched out gratefully among the pillows that Betty's gentle

hands arranged for her and made no protest while her high shoe and her stocking were taken off and the injured ankle tenderly examined.

It was swollen and angry looking, and while Betty applied cold compresses she pronounced sentence on the sufferer.

"You won't be able to get around on that foot for several days to come," said the erstwhile "Little Captain." "You will simply have to make up your mind to look pretty and let yourself be petted for a while. That should be easy—the looking pretty part, anyway!"

Carolyn smiled faintly and squeezed the Little Captain's hand.

"You are such a darling, Betty," she murmured gratefully. "And you don't know how awfully good it is to be here. It hasn't been fun—the last few hours."

"I'll wager it hasn't!" said Betty sympathetically. "And now I want to hear the whole wild tale while I get supper on the table."

They sat around the kitchen—which was an addition built on to the main bungalow—while Betty fussed around the stove, basting

meat and adding water to the vegetables. She would not let any one except Allen help her.

"For, after all, a housekeeper knows her own ways best," she explained, with pretty complacency. "Besides," with a curious, sympathetic glance at the girls' blown hair and dusty clothing, "you look pretty well used up and in need of rest. Sit still now and talk!"

They did, all together at first, then one at a time until Betty and Allen gradually wove a connected narrative from a mass of jumbled and confusing details.

Betty was as indignant as Allen over the gypsy episodes and was equally eager to see that the impudent vagabonds were punished and driven from the country.

"I don't see how they could be jailed, though, unless some crime were actually fastened on them," she added thoughtfully. "Although they tried to kidnap Stella once and were evidently on the verge of trying it again when Allen happened along, they never actually did it, and so there's not a thing to hang a charge on. Oh, dear!" with pretty concern, "I'm afraid my roast is getting too well done. *Do* you girls like your beef rare?"

"Betty, darling," Stella answered for them, "we like our beef any way at all. The way we feel now, we could cheerfully eat it raw!"

"You poor dears!" cried Betty, her cheeks pink from bending over the oven. "Allen, will you show them where they can wash while I get things on the table? There is really no reason at all why we can't eat right away. We can finish our conversation at the table."

"I never heard sweeter words!" sighed Lota.

A basin of water and a towel was brought to Carolyn's couch while the other girls took turns washing at the well outside.

The bungalow boasted a bath room; but since there was no running water and it was necessary to carry bucketfuls from the well, it was easier and pleasanter in nice weather to wash at the source of supply.

The cold water felt good to the girls and a hasty combing of hair brought with it a complete sense of refreshment.

"I feel ready for anything now," Lota confessed.

"And doesn't that roast beef smell good!" cried Meg, sniffing hungrily of the redolent

air. "It's almost worth being famished to be able to look forward to such a meal."

"Wherever Betty is, that's where you are sure to find comfort," said Irene, thinking fondly of the Little Captain. "Allen doesn't know how lucky he is."

"Oh, I don't know," said Stella, with an odd little smile. "I rather think he does, at that!"

Betty was hospitably thankful that she had chosen that night for a rather elaborate dinner.

"Allen and I have been dining on scraps for so long," she told her guests as they drew up to the table, "that we thought to-night we'd do ourselves proud with a roast and all the fixings. Isn't it lucky I did, the way things turned out?"

"It sure is lucky for us!" said Meg and Lota together, and Lota added:

"May I have just another little slice of that roast, Allen? It's simply delicious."

They had reached the dessert stage—which consisted of apple tarts and whipped cream—when they were startled by the sound of rain.

It was a sudden shower, but heavy while it lasted.

Allen pushed back his chair and made a dash for the yard.

"He has to put up the car," explained Betty, dimpling.

"It's a temperamental tub," said Allen, from the doorway. "It doesn't like the rain!"

"Well, this is one time *I* am going to enjoy it," said Meg, eating an apple tart with relish. "It's such wonderful luck to be here with you, Betty, sheltered and safe and in good company. Compared to last night this is my idea of paradise—nothing less!"

The hikers remembered with a shudder the interminable hours spent in the dusty old house, those blood-curdling signs set up by the elusive one who had presumably shared their shelter.

"I wonder just how mad the man who owns the house and probably shared it with us last night is," remarked Meg. "I guess we were lucky to get away without meeting him face to face. I would rather like to get a glimpse of him, though," she added.

"For my part, I'm quite willing to let him go unseen forever," said Stella. "Just now there are pleasanter things to consider——"

"Such as apple tarts," suggested Betty. "Have another!"

"Well," said Stella, passing her plate with feigned reluctance, "since you insist!"

"What is it, Carolyn?" Lota touched the girl's hand as it rested on the table cloth. "For the past half hour you've been lost in thoughts of your own. They can't have been very pleasant, either, for I've noticed that you frown frequently."

With an effort Carolyn roused herself. She tried to smile, but the attempt was not successful. Instead her lip quivered.

"I was thinking of H-Hal," she confessed. "I feel t-terribly worried about him. I'm afraid that he got into all this trouble trying to find my heirlooms for me."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you." This from Allen, who had come back from putting his car away and now joined them again at the table. "By this time Hal has probably flown back to Deepdale. He may be—probably is—engaged at this minute in packing away a good dinner."

Carolyn brightened at the prophecy, then some thought that she did not share with them caused her to shake her head.

"I only wish I could believe that," she said. "But I can't. You see, if you only knew what I know——"

"Hadn't you better tell us?" Betty suggested gently. "We can help, you know, only if we are in full possession of the facts."

Carolyn hesitated. Would Hal be very angry if she told what he had hinted at that day on the beach when they were with Grace and Amy? After all, he had told her so little —hardly anything at all. And now his welfare, his very life, might be at stake.

The result was that she told the girls and Allen of her talk that day with Hal on the beach.

"He hinted that he was on a secret mission," she told them. "He couldn't explain about it then but he sort of half promised that he would later on. Then, coming upon the gypsies so close to the spot where we had found the plane made me wonder if—well, if he and the pilot, too, might not have met with foul play. It looks very queer to me."

"So it does, when you put it in that light," Allen admitted. "However, these various incidents are probably unrelated and will prove to have a logical and innocent enough explanation once we get at it."

"But what shall we do, Allen?" asked Betty anxiously. "Something should be done!"

"We will start out the first thing in the morning and find this mysterious plane if it is still in the clearing," Allen promised. "We will also keep a sharp lookout for the gypsies, and if we see anything in the slightest way suspicious, will pop them in jail without the least compunction."

With that the girls must be content. However, in spite of the fact that Betty prepared comfortable sleeping quarters for them all, it was very little sleep that the girls got that night.

They were haunted by uneasy dreams in which dark faces constantly peered at them from behind the shelter of trees and bushes. Sometimes these apparitions wore the face of Hulah, the gypsy; sometimes, inexplicably, they resembled Hal. Once Carolyn dreamed of the plane in the clearing. She thought that Hal climbed into it, accompanied by a gypsy. Then, with an ugly look upon his face, he drove the plane straight at her.

She awoke, screaming, and it was some time before Stella, who slept with her, could soothe her back to a normal frame of mind.

The next morning was partially clear, al-

though the sky was still overcast with storm clouds.

"May rain again any minute," Meg grumbled. "Seems to me we have a right to expect some decent weather after all the rain we had last night."

"It may clear later," said Betty cheerfully. "Get your things on, girls. Allen says we are going, rain or shine."

"All except me," mourned Carolyn. "I have to be left at home all because I hadn't sense enough to keep from spraining my ankle."

Her comrades looked back to where the injured one reclined upon her couch, propped up by pillows and completely surrounded by magazines and two boxes of candy. The candy boxes were not full, to be sure, but they contained enough sweets to provide the girl with amusement for a considerable time to come.

"Somehow, I can't find it in my heart to pity you too much," laughed Meg. "You look altogether too comfortable!"

On her way out to join Allen, Betty paused for a moment beside Carolyn.

"Sure the ankle doesn't hurt too much?"

she asked anxiously. "Don't you think that Allen had better stop off in the village first and send the doctor up here?"

Carolyn shook her head emphatically.

"Please, Betty, no!" she begged. "The foot doesn't hurt a bit unless I bear my weight on it. You know it looked much better this morning."

Betty agreed reluctantly.

"If it isn't practically well by to-night we'll have the doctor, anyway," she threatened. "Are you sure," still hesitating, "that you will be all right if we leave you alone? It won't be long. We'll probably be back in a few hours."

"I shan't mind anything as long as you look for Hal and find out whether he's safe or not," said Carolyn decidedly.

"You won't be lonely?" Betty insisted.

"Not with Mr. Wags to keep me company!"

Carolyn whistled to the cocker spaniel and, with the aid of a piece of chocolate candy, lured him up on the couch.

"We'll be all right until you get back. Only," wistfully, "don't be too terribly long!"

Carolyn would brook no further delay and, since it was evident that she was genuinely

anxious on Hal's account, the searchers set out immediately.

Allen drove as quickly as he could to the place where he had accidentally encountered the Outdoor Girls the night before.

"First of all we'll see whether the plane is still in the clearing," he said, as they got down on the road. "If it is gone—well, then, we shall be pretty sure that Hal is all right. If it is still there, then I think it would be a good idea to get back to town as soon as possible and collect a few police officers and volunteer citizens and make a search."

They followed the wagon road but turned off at the place where the girls had first seen Hulah's face peering at them from among the trees.

The girls found that they had left a rather clearly-marked trail from that point back to the clearing where they had discovered the airplane.

They approached this clearing with a good deal of anxiety. Would the plane still be there?

It was. And from that mute evidence the searchers feared that Carolyn's anxiety for Hal had been well founded.

"I don't like it," and Allen frowned. "The

gypsies hanging around here gives the whole thing a sinister aspect. We're going back to town to get help for a search."

"We girls will stay here, if you don't mind, and look about a bit," said Stella. "Only," with a shudder, "do get back as quickly as you can!"

In the end, it was Stella and Irene who went to the village for the sheriff, Allen staying with the other girls near the plane.

In an incredibly short time the two Outdoor Girls returned with the sheriff, two under sheriffs, and a private citizen who had become interested and volunteered to join the search for the missing aviators.

These men searched the plane more thoroughly than the girls had done, while the latter watched them eagerly. Later, at the request of the sheriff, Stella led them to the place in the woods where she had first discovered the gypsies watching her.

Then the search began in earnest, the men spreading out in an ever-widening circle in a determined attempt to locate the gypsy camp.

"If we find the gypsies, I believe we shall find the aviators, too," said the sheriff. "When those fellows are in the neighbor-

hood, it's safe to lay almost any type of mischief at their door."

Meanwhile, the girls were doing a little investigating on their own account. They retraced their steps to the wagon road and the freshly made ruts they had discovered the day before.

"I believe if we follow these far enough we'll come to the gypsy camp," said Stella.

"I believe you're dead right," said Meg. "Let's go!"

Emboldened by the nearness of Allen and the sheriff's party, they had followed the ruts for some distance back into the woods when Irene cried out suddenly and darted forward.

"It's Hulah, the old gypsy!" she cried. "I saw her hiding behind those bushes!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE SQUARE BOX

THE Outdoor Girls gave eager pursuit and soon caught up to the old hag. She tried to dart aside into a thicket and, by so doing, was caught in her own trap.

The gaudy, billowing skirt she wore was caught by a hundred gripping fingers of thorn and twig. Although she twisted and turned and screamed horribly, she could not free herself.

She turned upon the girls, her hands upraised in imprecation.

"You shall pay for this!" she shrieked. "I will put the curse——"

A shot rang out in the woods—two—three——

The girls shrank back as several men dashed into the clearing. A gypsy ran before them. In his arms was a heavy box.

More shots were fired at him by the pursuers but failed to reach their mark. The gypsy turned and tried to dart past the girls

into the woods. Lota was nearest him. Quick as thought, she put out her foot and the gypsy stretched his length upon the ground.

The box was jerked from his hands, the cover opened and on the ground at the feet of the astonished girls rolled and scattered a small fortune in old trinkets and gems!

Then the girls noticed for the first time that the men who pursued the gypsy were not Allen Washburn and the sheriff's party.

"Hal Duckworth!" cried Stella, rubbing her eyes. "Am I seeing straight?"

"And Will! And Frank!" cried Meg and Lota together.

"Hurrah! The gang's all here!" shouted Irene hysterically.

Then they noted a fourth man, big and blond.

Hal and Will and Frank and the big blond fell upon the prostrate gypsy, binding him securely. Hulah shrieked and tried to disentangle herself from the bushes. Wondering, the girls stooped down and gathered up the trinkets that had scattered from the opened box.

While all this was in progress there was the sound of another scuffle near them. Allen

and the rest of the searching party appeared with two scowling gypsies in tow.

"Caught 'em!" cried Allen triumphantly. Then, at sight of Hal Duckworth and the other boys: "Great Scott! where did you drop from?"

"Yes!" said Stella, rising with the box of trinkets held close in her arms. "I think it's about time that Hal Duckworth explained himself!"

Without replying, Hal went over to Stella and took the box from her hands. He stirred the contents about with his finger. When he looked up his face wore the contented expression of one who has seen a task through to a successful conclusion.

Then he turned to the big blond, with a gesture of his hand giving the young man the center of the stage.

"This is Jim Everett, pilot, instructor and fellow-sufferer at the hands of the gypsies. A regular fellow," he added, with a grin. "I expect he'll cut me out with you girls when you get to know him better."

"But, Hal, please tell us what has happened," broke in Meg, after the girls had greeted Everett. "We don't understand a thing. The box, the gypsies, Will and Frank

being here—everything is a deep, dark mystery."

"We've been following these beggars for some time," Hal explained to a breathless audience. "I had a hunch that the gypsies knew more than they were willing to tell about the attack on Mr. Fennelson and the robbery of his store——"

"The Fennelson robbery!" murmured Irene breathlessly.

"I picked up a clue or two—such as that brooch you found near your summerhouse after the gypsies had been there," he said, turning to Stella. "Jim and I have been after them, off and on, ever since. Yesterday, from the air, we saw their camp and Jim landed his plane in a clearing."

"We know!" cried Lota breathlessly. "We found the plane and your notebook."

Hal nodded absently.

"However, this was a case of where the snooper gets caught," he said, with a humorous smile. "Some of the gypsies found us nosing around and tied us up."

"We thought something of that sort had happened," Allen said. "That's why we rounded up half of Terryville and came in search of you."

"That was pretty white, Allen," said Hal gratefully. "But, you see, Will and Frank came along first. They surprised the gypsies, released Jim and me, and we turned the tables, capturing, as you see, not only the rascal here, but this box containing the loot stolen from Fennelson's store.

Irene sighed.

"I must be terribly dumb," she said. "But I don't see how Frank and Will happened to get into the picture."

"Grace and Amy were so worried about you girls that they sent us after you. We were supposed to take care of you, see that you did not fall into the hands of the gypsies, and so forth. Instead," with a grin, "it was Hal here and his friend, the pilot, that we rescued."

Stella screamed suddenly.

"The box with the jewels!" she cried. "You gave it to me just now, Hal, and some one snatched it from my hand!"

"Watch that gypsy woman!" cried Meg, darting forward. "She has something hidden under her shawl!"

It was indeed Hulah who had writhed herself free of the gripping bushes, had sneaked

up behind Stella while every one was intent upon Hal's story and snatched the box from the girl's hand.

The gypsy woman was surprisingly swift for one so old. She disappeared among the bushes as Meg cried out her warning.

But Meg was swift, too. Like a flash she was after the old hag, Lota at her heels. The two girls, western bred, had frequently taken part in round-ups "back home." After working with a milling throng of steers it was a comparatively easy matter to round up one wicked old woman.

They caught sight of her red shawl whisking through the bushes.

"To the left!" shrieked Lota.

"Right-o!" returned Meg.

Hulah saw that she was being headed off and turned sharply, doubling on her tracks. It seemed to the girls for a moment that she was running directly into their arms. Then they saw her purpose.

Lying concealed among the trees was a deep, unhealthy-looking pool. So well-concealed was the water that Meg and Lota were forced to check themselves abruptly to avoid plunging headfirst into it.

Hulah had paused on the brink of the pool, too. From beneath her red shawl she drew a box.

"Stop her!" shrieked Meg. "She is going to throw the box into the water."

Both girls fell upon the old hag at once. They were strong as only girls can be who have been reared in the great outdoors and who have been trained since infancy to use their strength.

Hulah writhed and struggled and shrieked, but she could not get her arms free.

"I'll hold her!" gasped Meg. "You get the box from her, Lo. Be quick!"

Lota tried to wrest the box from the grasp of the old woman. But the skinny fingers were strong. Lota was still tugging at the box when Stella and Irene burst through the underbrush, followed by the boys and the officers of the law. The latter dragged their prisoners with them, which accounted for their delay in reaching the scene.

"Good work!" approved the sheriff. "I'll handcuff the old woman. She can tell the rest of her story in the police station!"

"Fine idea, officer!" agreed Hal heartily. "I think you would be on the safe side to

arrest the whole gypsy tribe. However, I guess we have caught the chief offenders, at that."

It was then that Hal asked about Carolyn. When they told him why she had been forced to stay at the bungalow he was so eager to see her that Betty suggested they return there without delay.

"We will have a second breakfast," she suggested hospitably. "You boys must be half famished."

The sheriff seemed to think—and not without reason—that the box of stolen trinkets was as much the property of the law as were the gypsy prisoners and so should be delivered up at once to the proper authorities.

"Let me borrow it for half an hour," Hal begged. "One of you can come along, if you like, to see we don't make off with it."

This was conceded him, though the sheriff took him at his word and appointed one of his under officers to accompany Hal and the box to the Washburn's bungalow.

Jim Everett would not join the party of young folks, pleading anxiety for his plane as an excuse.

"I want to make sure the gypsies haven't

harmed it," he said. "And it may need some jacking up, too, before we start on the homeward flight."

"We will send sandwiches and cake back to you by Hal," Betty promised.

Hal shifted the box and held out his hand to the young aviator.

"You've been great, Jim," he said simply. "Thanks a lot, old man!"

"That's nothing," returned the smiling young fellow. "You will be flying a plane of your own, some day. So long, folks!" He turned away to seek his plane in the clearing.

Some time later at the door of the Washburn bungalow, the Outdoor Girls paused. With an impish wrinkling of her nose, Irene said:

"We'll leave you to go in alone, Hal, and break your pleasant news to Carolyn. Outside, for us!"

However, the girls lingered where they could see and hear what went on. That much, they felt, was only their due!

Carolyn was half-dozing on the couch when Hal entered the room. Mr. Wags, roused from a sound sleep, jumped down and

tried his best to look ferocious—and succeeded only in looking funny.

Carolyn sat up, stared, and rubbed her eyes.

"Hal!" she cried. "Is it—oh, it isn't really *you!*"

"Isn't it, though!" laughed Hal.

He crossed the room swiftly, sat down beside her on the couch and placed the open box before her.

"Look, Carol!" he cried. "Do you see anything belonging to you here?"

Carolyn stared, bewildered. Then, with a little cry of joy, she plunged her hand among the trinkets and caught up a small, heart-shaped locket.

"It was my mother's!" she cried, a catch in her voice. "And here's the bracelet and the earrings and—but, Hal, how did you ever manage it?"

"I told you once, didn't I," said Hal earnestly, "that you could count on me, Carol, for anything?"

"Come away!" said Betty suddenly, drawing the others from the window. "They don't want us! Besides, we've got to make plans for our party."

"What party?" cried four Outdoor Girls in chorus.

"The biggest, most glorious house party any one ever thought of," cried Betty, stretching her arms wide in a comprehensive gesture. "And everybody's invited, even that awfully nice aviator, Jim Everett. We've got to do something to celebrate the end of your hike, haven't we?"

"I'll say we have!" the hikers agreed contentedly.

"All right," said Betty gayly. "Directly after breakfast we'll make out a list!"

The Outdoor Girls went with her into the kitchen, still content to follow where the Little Captain led.

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